



HELL'S REACH

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HELL'S REACH

(Galactic Liberation Series #6)

by

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and

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Galactic Liberation Series:

Starship Liberator

Battleship Indomitable

Flagship Victory

Hive War

Straker's Breakers

Hell's Reach

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The Breakers settled on Utopia—an artificial planet wrapping around a tiny star. Right from the start, we breathed a great sigh of relief. Utopia was far enough from the nearest star system to be undetectable by conventional means. The engineering of the world itself was amazing, even though we had little idea who had built it in the first place, as it had long ago been abandoned—or the sentient inhabitants had been exterminated.

At some point in the past a shell of planetary matter had been stretched and transformed into a Dyson-cylinder, an enclosed metal ring encircling the star. Landing on the inner surface, we found life was quite pleasant. There were low mountain ranges and shallow seas. With as much wilderness as ten normal planets, Utopia gave us freedom to grow. Most importantly, the world provided a secure base from which to operate.

Over the next year we not only set up trade with the Fuggios Conglomerate at Crossroads, we expanded direct commerce with the aquatic Salamanders, and especially with the peaceful, plant-loving Humbar. This got our economy moving and provided increasing prosperity to our people.

But we had to have some way of making hard cash in order to maintain our starships. To that end, we remained a mercenary outfit, and as long as any contract was profitable and morally acceptable, we took it. We destroyed crimorg and pirate bases, securing and cleaning up several star systems. We freed captives when we could, and word of our activities began to spread. We made a few friends—and plenty of enemies.

- A History of Galactic Liberation, by Derek Barnes Straker, 2860 A.D.

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Chapter 1

Straker's Breakers' militarized transport SBS *Hercules*, approaching the Humbar system.

Having left Utopia days ago, Carla Engels was beginning to get bored with her latest mission. She took her swiveling chair on the small bridge of the *Hercules* after setting her bottle of caff into its arm.

All the screens and boards were in the green, showing the ship's imminent arrival at the Humbar system was destined to be uneventful. Once she reached Humbar, she'd offload her cargo of plants and agricultural products in exchange for a variety of useful goods and products manufactured by the bovines. Then, she'd travel back to the Breakers' secret homeworld, the Dyson-cylinder they called Utopia.

Such was the life of a Breaker trading ship—dull, routine, and comfortable. Well, at least it got her out into space, where she'd lived most of her adult life. Dirtside was fine, but like a sailor denied the sea, space called to her if she was away too long. It was better to be captain of an active transport than the admiral of a fleet stuck in orbit.

Jon Sylvester, *Hercules*' portly helmsman, was also clearly bored. "Transit in five, four, three, two, one," he droned.

It could be worse, Carla reflected.

Thirty heartbeats later, something went wrong.

Alarm klaxons shrieked. Babble broke out among the crew.

"Collision—collision—" the ship's SAI said in its artificial voice.

"Shields up!" Engels ordered. "Evasive—"

The sensors officer raised her voice as the deck vibrated. "Ma'am, I have four bogeys at close range. We're taking fire—multiple shieldbusters. The main generator is down."

Engels gripped the arms of her chair. "Sylvester, get us the hell out of here!"

"Sidespace engines recharging, ma'am," Sylvester replied, and he no longer sounded bored. "It'll be nine minutes before we can jump."

"Emergency override—shorten that countdown! Sensors, who are they?"

"Three Arattak frigates. It's the damned spiders. The other ship... I don't know what it is."

“They’re firing their shieldbusters again,” Bortmann, the weapons officer said. “Our point defenses are having no effect.”

The bridge shook. “Reinforcement drained. Hull armor degraded. Reserve power is already running low. We’re sitting ducks.”

“Hellfire,” Captain Engels swore. She turned in a full three-sixty circuit, taking in her suddenly inadequate bridge. “Sylvester, how long can you keep them off us?”

“Ninety seconds, maybe. They have us boxed, and this tub is packed full of cargo. We can’t dump it fast enough—we’re not built to cut and run. They can—” The ship shook again. “There go the fusion engines. Just impellers now. That other ship—”

“We’re being grappled, ma’am,” Bortmann said. “Korven-style magnetics.”

Engels grimaced. “Launch the data module.”

“Launching.”

Engels flipped up the cover of her chair’s arm, revealing an old-fashioned keypad with hard buttons. She input a code, feeling the keys click one by one, until a telltale light turned from green to red. “Nav data wiped. Computer core dumped.” At least Utopia’s location wouldn’t be revealed by an infoscan.

The ship shuddered once more, and then grew still. Engels cleared her throat as she activated the public address function. “Now hear this. We’re about to be boarded by superior forces. Do not resist. Stand down. We’ll be captured. Remember your prisoner-of-war training. Our goal right now is to survive with honor. Keep faith with your fellow Breakers. The data module is away. General Straker will come for us. Don’t despair.”

Engels continued to speak calmly to her crew until heavily armed Arattak—man-sized spiders with pink fur—skittered onto the bridge and immobilized the officers with sticky webs.

The spider in charge celebrated its victory by decapitating Bortmann and drinking from his inverted head.

Sylvester vomited on the deck.

“Hang in there, Jon,” Engels said, barely able to hold her own rising gorge and wondering if she should’ve fought them... but that would’ve gotten half the crew killed instead of only one.

The sound of Bortmann’s blood being drained would echo in her nightmares.

* * *

Paradiso town, Utopia

Derek Straker rolled out of bed before his mind was truly awake, grabbing at the comlink that was insistently beeping on his rough-hewn wooden bedside table. He shoved the annoying thing into his ear. “Straker here.”

“Sorry to wake you, sir,” the voice of the duty officer said. “A black box drone has arrived from SBS *Hercules*—they were attacked in the Humbar system.”

Shit. Carla...? “How long ago?”

“Drone travel time from Humbar to Utopia is short—twelve to twenty-four hours, depending on sidespace conditions.”

“I’ll be right there. Straker out.” He hurriedly pulled on his working fatigues and noticed the time on the chrono—0312 hours. “Never fails,” he muttered to no one. “Always in the middle of a good night’s sleep. Stephanie!”

The android nanny opened the bedroom door. “Yes, Derek?”

“I have to go to work. Don’t wake the kids. Maintain their schedule for now. You’ll get further instructions later.”

“Yes, Derek.” She withdrew.

Trying not to think about Carla, Straker slipped quietly through the spacious center of their *casa grande*, into the small garden and then out the rear gate. The new-built mansion was situated at the edge of the hillside town of Paradiso, overlooking the Breakers’ base and settlement below—a compromise with the Italian-descended population, who’d wanted to install their *salvator* and his family in a palace in the central *piazza*.

Above him and to the east, the reflection from the inner surface of the Dyson-cylinder’s landscape was a pastoral scene spread below—fields of food crops and medicinal drug plants, pastures with sheep and cattle, barns and sheds scattered among them. The industrious people of Paradiso had worked enthusiastically to fulfill the promise of their town’s name—and after a year of peace, it was starting to pay off.

Straker fired up his aircar and swooped down the slope, turning the fifteen-minute walk to the base into a ninety-second hop. He landed on the flat rooftop pad of the ops center. Around him the Breakers organization

was stirring, lights appearing in barracks windows and on vehicles as the alert propagated throughout First Brigade. This was the Breakers' active-service unit. The reservists of Second and Third Brigades had the luxury of a few more hours sleep.

For now.

Why the hell hadn't he fought harder when Carla had wanted to command a milk-run to Humbar?

His mind answered the question easily. He'd given in precisely because it *was* a milk run. There'd never been any problems at Humbar, and they had no reason to think there would be today. More importantly, Carla had been getting crabby with dirtside fever. She belonged in space, not on a permanently sunny garden of Eden.

He wasn't through with guilt, however. He asked himself why he hadn't told her to take out a cruiser to escort the *Hercules* as an exercise?

Money, that's why. It was always money—fuel, ammo, maintenance—and the Breakers were barely making ends meet right now. Saving money on any mission meant long-term survival, Colonel Keller and the Ruxin CEO Adriana kept telling him that.

But now, that economizing meant they'd lost Breakers—and now they'd have to spend more money to get them back.

Money and blood.

Colonel Winter, commander of the Breakers' mechsuit battalion, met him at the door and escorted him to the briefing table. There the AI Indy's android avatar stood, cursor in hand. Colonel Keller, the stiff, matronly logistics officer, rushed up with stacks of smartcopy to take her seat with an air of harassment. The rest of the heavy wooden table was rounded out with staff officers and noncoms from each functional area—supply, comms, maintenance and more.

"Let's hear it, Indy," Straker said.

"Thank you, sir." A hologram appeared above the table, and nearby wall-screens changed to illustrate Indy's words. "Normally, Commander Sinden would be briefing you, but given the time constraints, she felt it would serve the Breakers better if she remained with her intelligence team and let me do the dog-and-pony."

Straker let that pass with a nod. Clearly, Indy could prepare a briefing and preliminary analysis more quickly than even a team of brainiacs could—and fortunately, most brainiacs like Sinden were blind to the jealousy

another officer might feel about letting someone else brief the boss in a crisis. They'd rather stay plugged in and crunch numbers.

"Here's the vid and details." The screens populated with metrics and telemetry, the myriad data constantly stored and updated in every ship's black-box drone, while the hologram displayed the bridge of the *Hercules*, the armed transport on a trading run to the Humbar—peaceful, friendly, bovine aliens who were rapidly becoming the Breakers' most reliable commercial partners.

"Transit in five, four, three, two, one," the *Hercules*' helmsman on the holovid said.

Alarm klaxons shrieked suddenly. Bridge officers flooded the system with reports and orders while the SAI droned its verbal warnings in the background.

"Shields up!" Engels ordered. "Evasive—"

"Ma'am, I have four bogeys at close range." The image shook. "We're taking fire—multiple shieldbusters. The main generator is down."

Straker leaned forward, and his heart beat faster as his hands gripped the arms of his chair. He wanted to leap into the fight.

"Sylvester, get us the hell out of here!"

"Sidespace engines recharging, ma'am. It'll be nine minutes until we can jump."

"Emergency override—shorten that countdown! Sensors, who are they?"

"Three Arattak frigates. It's the damned spiders. The other ship... I don't know what it is."

The holo froze there, and Straker forced himself to lean back in his seat.

Indy gestured at two screens. "On the left you see the three Arattak ships—typical conical shape, pointed toward the target, which is the *Hercules*. Beams around the circular edge, shieldbuster weapon in the middle—the stinger. The fourth ship is detailed on Screen Two."

Straker stood and stepped close to the screen, eyes narrowing.

"Reminds me of something." Sections of the hull flashed with highlights, Indy's doing. "Those structures... magnetic grapples. Like the Korveni had. Except we destroyed the Korveni."

"You destroyed one set of Korven," a voice from across the room said. "Those are from another set."

Straker turned to see Chiara Jilani, currently the mayor of Paradiso—but more importantly, a longtime guerilla fighter. Her life's mission had been to stand against the Korveni pirates who'd enslaved the people of Utopia for many years. "And we're just finding out about this now?"

"I reported it all to Commander Sinden long ago, bossman," Jilani replied as she strode up to the table. "The Korveni the Breakers destroyed last year were mostly of the Korven race—their *cosa nostra*, their mafia, if you will. That, on the other hand, looks like a real Korven military ship."

Indy spoke. "The Korven home systems are far away, across the Middle Reach, and there was no reason to think they were any threat to us. Our information sources on Crossroads indicated the Korven species, while highly militaristic, didn't take any particular offense to our destruction of the Korveni crimorg."

"We're not certain if this is a genuine Korven military ship," Winter said. "It might be a rogue—or a Korven vessel the Arattak captured and manned for their own purposes. We do know the Arattak are incessantly aggressive. The real question is, how the hell did they catch the *Hercules* transiting in? Didn't Admiral Engels vary her arrival point? Because that's our SOP."

"The data indicates," Indy said with certainty, "that the *Hercules* arrived at a randomly selected point over one light-hour from any previously used point. The odds against the Arattak intercepting the ship by mere chance approach infinity."

Straker rubbed the stubble of his jaw. "Then they have some kind of tech—a detector, a predictor. That could change warfare and sidespace travel as we know it, if ships can wait in ambush—and the arriving ships can't see what's waiting. Indy, tell Murdock to start looking into this. Wake his ass up if you have to. I'll see him at noon in his lab for an initial report."

"Waking him up now, sir."

The android pointed the cursor to roll the holovid. They watched grimly as *Hercules* was beaten down and boarded. All too soon, the displays froze.

Indy made a gesture of finality. "That's all we have."

"Lucky the data module got away at all," Straker muttered.

"The Arattak probably aren't used to transports having them," Colonel Keller said. "Most cargo ships run on thin margins and aren't going to pay for a sidespace-capable drone they may never use."

"Money, money, money," Straker said bitterly.

Jilani took an empty seat at the table. “Money makes the Reach go ’round. Get used to it.”

“It’s rather like ammo,” Straker agreed. “It never matters until you run short. So, what do we do next? We can’t let this go without an immediate response.”

The officers glanced at one another. Jilani was the most tactless of the lot—or the least worried about what the boss thought—so she answered first. “We can’t immediately go after *Hercules*. We have to assume the enemy might have tracked our drone.”

“Worst-case thinking, eh?” Straker asked.

“Yes. If they can track that drone through sidespace—they could find us here.”

“More likely they can only see that something’s coming, but not who or how many,” Indy said. “Four warships to pirate one transport... that seems like overkill. The Korven ship could have done it alone—plus one Arattak, maybe. I’m worried they have further plans for us.”

Straker thought about that. Could this be more than a raid? More than a quick slap delivered out of anger? Could the Arattak be planning much more damage for the Breakers?

“We should send a strong force at them,” he said. “We’ll hit them hard. Then they’ll leave us alone. And besides, we have to rescue our people.”

Keller spread her arms and fingers wide. “It’s possible that they’re all dead. We don’t know how this ended—and if the Arattak can backtrack us, they might be heading here to Utopia even now. We only have six capital ships, sir. We can’t send any away on rescue missions.”

Straker drummed his fingers on the table. “But we do need information—and we have skimmers. When will Zaxby be back from Crossroads?”

“He’s due home within twelve hours,” Indy replied.

“How soon could an Arattak or Korven force conceivably get here?”

“Unknown.”

“Okay... The fleet to go to Alert One immediately. The rest of the Breakers are now on Alert Two. Pass the word. Cancel all trade run departures for now. We have how many operational skimmers?”

“Fourteen of sixteen are here. Zaxby has one, and one is on the quarterly run to Freenix.”

“Right,” Straker said. “Four skimmers will take stealth positions well away from Utopia. We’ll rotate them in every few days if we have to. Four

more will remain inside the ring, with crews on alert. The other six will be outfitted as scout ships and sent to recon the systems we trade with. Skimmers may not be much use against shield-equipped ships, but they're very good at hiding and running—and getting home without being followed, I hope. Commodore Gray, send them out as soon as they're ready, at your discretion.”

“Understood. One to Humbar, I presume?”

“No. I'll take *Redwolf* to Humbar to investigate directly. She's got all the best tech Murdock can cram into her—underspace, top-level SAI, shield, weapons—hell, she's more of a corvette than a yacht anymore. Once I find our people, I'll send word and we'll mount a rescue.”

Colonel Keller coughed for attention. “Sir, it might be more efficient to buy our people back, if it comes to that. You should take trade-currency aboard, and quantum-locked Conglomerate credit.”

“Breakers don't pay ransom. That'll just get more of our people taken hostage.”

“It won't hurt to have options, sir. And you might have to pay for fuel, repairs, bribes—who knows?”

Straker stared for a moment at Keller, who gazed back without flinching. *Damn it if she wasn't right*, he thought. Policy was fine, but sometimes you had to bend the rules to get things done—and besides, they were his rules to bend.

“Point taken. Zaxby will pilot and be my brainiac. Steiner, you're muscle.”

The big Sachsen nodded, smiling a frightening, toothy smile.

“We'll figure out the rest of the team over the next twelve hours. I want to transit as soon as we get Zaxby aboard. Indy, get advance warning to him ASAP.”

“Certainly, General,” Indy said.

“Anything else right now?” Straker let his eyes roam over the assemblage. No one flinched. “Dismissed. Get to work.”

They filed out, but one noticeable woman in distractingly tight clothing remained.

“Damn, bossman,” Jilani said, “you military types are no fun. I was hoping for some teeth-gritted snarling. Some heartfelt blame and finger-pointing. Fun, in other words.”

“Like your town council meetings?” Straker asked, swinging his chair around to face her. “If you want fun and fireworks, Loco’s your man... or isn’t he?”

“Off and on.” Jilani admitted. She scowled and ran her fingers through her long black hair, today highlighted with bright orange smartcolor streaks. That hair—and her open, feisty personality—she was hard to ignore.

“You and Loco are too similar. Attraction, repulsion... attraction again. Like magnets.”

“Like you and Carla? People are people. We aren’t little military machines the way you seem to believe, General.”

Straker contemplated her for a moment. “Is that what you really think?”

“Oh, not all the time... but you do have the tendency.”

“I think you’re just envious.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Envious?”

“That the townspeople don’t follow orders better. What’s it like being the mayor of Paradiso these days?”

“This mayor is regretting taking the job,” she said. “I’m holding elections for mayor next month, myself recused.”

“Really? But you’re the people’s choice, I’m sure.”

She shrugged. “Playing the hero was fine for a while, but it gets fucking tiresome. Everyone wants you to wave a magic wand and solve all their problems with a word. I need to get out of their way and let them work it out, and I need to get back to being who I am—Captain Jilani, free trader, with the emphasis on *free*.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re trying to sell me something?”

“Not yet, bossman.”

“Yet you’re here, getting involved in Breaker business as Captain Jilani, not as mayor. Right?”

“When we’re attacked, it’s all our business, I’d say.”

Straker pursed his lips in suspicion. Jilani was basically honest, but she had a streak of secretiveness that had been beaten into her by a brutal adolescence. Sometimes, like now, it seemed like those two sides of her were at war with each other—and Straker didn’t quite know how to deal with that.

But he knew who did. “Loco will be in charge here, so whatever you do, coordinate with him. Until those elections happen, you’re still the mayor.”

“Got it. We’ll hold the fort. Later, bossman.” She swaggered off.

“Later.” He couldn’t help following her hips with his eyes until she’d gone out of sight.

He pursed his lips, still wondering about what schemes she might be cooking up, but then he shook his head and turned his thoughts back to the crisis at hand.

At noon, Straker met Murdock in his lab. Sinden, and several others joined him to see what the Breakers’ mad scientist had to say about how the *Hercules* could have been ambushed.

Murdock was tall and thin, residually handsome underneath his stained coverall. He wore a greasy blonde ponytail, and he looked pallid and unhealthy. He had the nervous air of a stim junkie as he explained his findings with jerks and twitches of his hands and fingers.

“So, ah, I’ve taken a hard look at the black box feed—by the way we need to upgrade those things, need more data, a lot more data—and I don’t have much to go on, really, but I got a theory. See, when a ship transits sidespace, it theoretically generates a wavefront, but that wavefront collapses and cancels itself out within microseconds in an infinite recursion, so—”

“Murdock!” Straker clapped his hands. “Cut to the bedrock. What do you think they can actually do?”

“Well, this is all very theoretical, you understand. Lots of things are theoretically possible, like interstellar FTL comms, or instant matter transmission, but they’re still beyond our reach, maybe for millennia.”

“Like spontaneous subquantum AI generation?” Sinden chimed in.

“Yes, yes, the Mindspark Device. I still don’t know how to make another one, but I’m working on—”

Straker snapped his fingers. “Focus, Frank. Sidespace tracker. What do you think they can do? Dumb it down for me. Best guess.”

“Right, right, um, ah, well, best guess, yes... If I were able to build a sensitive enough detector with a powerful SAI processor, with a little luck it could detect an incoming transit, and where it will emerge.”

“Could it tell how many ships were coming, or how large?”

“Not exactly. It could tell how many separate sidespace fields, and how powerful.”

“Could they backtrack the signatures to their departure point?”

“Theoretically yes, but in reality: no. So yes, maybe... but no, no. No.”

Straker glared. He was beginning to get frustrated. People got hurt when he lost his temper, so he spoke his next words carefully. “Which is it? Pick one, Frank.”

“Okay, I’ll say no, for now. Ask me again in ten years.”

Straker sighed. “So how do we defeat it?”

“With tech? I don’t know yet.” Murdock clenched and opened his hands in the air as if grabbing at flies. “I need to get my hands on their devices, so if you get a chance—”

Straker gave him a thumbs-up. “We’ll grab one if we can. Otherwise, how do we keep from getting jumped every time we emerge?”

Sinden cleared her throat. “I can think of one easy solution. Shut down the generators early—drop out of sidespace in a different place than they expect. They’d have no way to predict that.”

“Problem is, *you* couldn’t predict your arrival point either,” Murdock said. “Sidespace isn’t like normal space, where you approach your target at a measured pace, no, no. Shut down early, and you could come out almost anywhere in the universe. Anywhere!”

“Oh, come on,” Straker said. “There has to be some tolerance in the sidespace engines, some wiggle room. So, we program the computers to shut down a tiny bit early, which will throw the ship to some random spot nearby, not too far.”

“No, no, no!” Murdock pounded a workbench, making components jump and knocking a spanner onto the floor with a clatter. “The way sidespace works is, you either arrive totally inside your basket, or totally outside it. If you’re outside it, you could arrive *anywhere*. When ships disappear in sidespace, they’re *gone*. The one single recorded instance of anyone making it back to human space was the UES *Augsburg* in the year 2565. They lost both generators in a freak malfunction. They ended up *sixty thousand light years* away. It took them *seventeen years* to get home.”

“I read about that,” Straker said. “So a ship in sidespace can change her target during transit—with some strain on the generators—but you can’t simply shut them down.”

“Right, right. Think of sidespace like a multidimensional matrix where each discrete locational basket corresponds to normal space, but randomly. Shift over one basket, and that location might be almost anywhere.”

“Wait, wait... ” Sinden said. “Look, sidespace target coordinates are usually locked, but that’s procedural, not technical. You don’t want a stray

keystroke or bump of the controls to send you off course. But there's nothing that keeps a ship from changing course within sidespace. Choosing a new target location—a basket, as you called it.”

“Except the strain on the generators—which would be considerable, maybe catastrophic,” Murdock replied. “If you lose all your generators, you're screwed. That's a big roll of the dice.”

The others gave Straker room as he began to pace. “There have to be some other tactics to mitigate this problem until we come up with a tech solution.”

“I can think of some.” Sinden ticked things off on her fingers. “Send out a large nuke to go off at our emergence point to shock or destroy whatever's waiting, and come in behind it. Or a missile pack if you want more discrimination. Or send a bunch of decoy drones ahead, set to arrive in the same system at random points. For underspace-equipped ships, you could dive immediately and run.”

“There has to be some detection limit,” Straker said. “Why not transit in far, far outside curved space? Way outside the target system, in outer flatspace.”

Murdock leaned over to tap at a keyscreen. “Hmm, maybe, but if they did detect you, they could jump to the same spot. You'd probably get there first, which would help, but they might still hit you with a bigger fleet.”

Straker checked his chrono. “Looks to me like this opens up a whole new set of tactical problems. You brainiacs have four hours to discuss it, because we're leaving on time, hell or high water.”

Three hours later, Straker walked his Ripper battlesuit into the *Redwolf's* crowded hold, clamping it down next to Steiner's.

“I didn't know you were going to war,” a familiar voice from behind him said.

“Mara!” Straker turned to scoop up his sister in a hug.

She looked at him strangely, and he let her go.

“You're freaking out about Carla, aren't you?” she asked.

“Of course I am,” he admitted.

Mara nodded. “Holding back your emotions. Putting on a good show for the troops—but you don't fool me.”

“That's because you're a brainiac.”

She made a face. “It's in spite of the fact I'm a brainiac. We're known for intellect, not empathy.”

He nodded, and he forced a smile. "I've hardly seen you out of your labs lately, you and Murdock. If you'd been there at noon, I would've thought you two had a thing going."

Mara made a face. "Blech. His rejuvenation tank might have fixed his body, but it didn't fix his habits. I have to order him to go shower and brush his teeth once a day, and half the time he sleeps on a cot in the lab."

"Order him?"

"Like most total geeks, he'll do anything a pretty girl tells him to... if you can get him to pay attention."

"So he *does* need a girlfriend."

"Maybe, but it'll never be me."

"Why not?"

She avoided his eye and picked up some gear. "Let's get this stuff aboard."

Straker eyed her with sudden suspicion. Mara had two traveling cases with her, which she'd stacked in a pile of gear on the tarmac.

"What this?" he demanded. "You think you're coming aboard? No."

"Yes. Yes, I'm going with you. Come on, Carla is my sister-in-law. She's made me into an auntie twice over."

Straker stepped into her way, spreading his arms. "This wasn't the plan."

"Not *your* plan," she said.

"I'm in charge, in case you didn't notice."

"Okay, you're in charge. Now get out of my way, Derek, before I kick you in the patella."

Straker instinctively covered his crotch, remembering a five-year-old who knew exactly where to hurt her big brother.

"No, the patella," she said, pointing lower. "The *kneecap*."

He grinned in spite of himself. "That's all you could ever reach, squirt. Besides, there's no space aboard... unless you want to room with Zaxby."

"Ew. I'll bunk with Steiner."

"Koroba's bunking with Steiner."

"I already told Koroba to stand down. I'm taking her place."

Straker sighed. "Why? We already have Zaxby for the brainiac stuff. Koroba's a trained operative with covert experience, and obviously a woman. I might need her."

“I’m ‘obviously’ a woman too. You already have two trained operatives—yourself and Steiner—and Zaxby’s a War Male. You need more brains on this trip, not more brawn. For machines, Zaxby’s fine—but I’m no slouch myself. For biotech, I’m the best you have, and I’ve spent the past year studying the aliens out here in the Middle Reach.”

Straker checked his chrono and growled in his throat. “Fine, fine. Let’s get you aboard. We’re supposed to meet Zaxby in half an hour, and then transit straight out.”

Steiner took the news of his new roommate with a laconic shrug. “All equal to me,” he said in his stilted Earthan.

“Nobody’s equal to you,” Mara said, kissing him on the cheek. “Now stow my gear, will you, Jorgen?”

Straker saw Steiner actually blush. Pretty girls had forever made mighty men pause, he thought, from Helen of Troy onward. “Help Mara get settled, will you, Jorgen?” He smirked.

Steiner turned an even deeper red. “*Jawohl, Herr General.*”

Half an hour later, the *Redwolf* waited for Zaxby within the tiny bubble of curved space generated by the mass of the cylinder and its mini-star.

Once the octopoid arrived nearby and shuttled over, Zaxby set course for Humbar.

Chapter 2

Loco, on maneuvers in the wilds of the Utopia Dyson-cylinder.

“Come in, Mikey,” Chiara Jilani’s voice called over Loco’s comlink as he sighted down the barrel of his slugthrower. Today, he was drilling the support troops on basic low-tech infantry tactics. You never knew when electronics would fail and old-fashioned chemical-powered bullets would be all you had.

“Stand by. And quit calling me Mikey.” He fired a burst at the armored target-robot that bobbed and weaved among the trees, scoring a hit. Around him, soldiers in fatigues did the same. He let them shoot for a few more seconds before interrupting. “Cease fire! Take ten. Squad leaders, give feedback.”

After they reported in, he noticed one more blinking call. “What is it, Mayor Jilani?”

“Oh, are we speaking formally now, *General* Paloco?”

“I dunno. First you like me, then you don’t, then you like me again, then you don’t—wash, rinse, repeat, and put me through the wringer every time. It’s draining.”

“Well, if you want to be drained again, big guy, come back to base. I have a proposition for you.”

Loco wavered. Never in his life had he been in this position—liking a woman so much he was helpless in the face of her emotional whiplashing. He ought to tell her to piss off. He should walk away and never look back—but he couldn’t seem to do it. It’d been a year since they met, and mere infatuation had never lasted this long, never been this intense.

Was it love? He had no idea. He’d never been in love before, never been all moony-eyed over someone like Derek over Carla. Women were amusement park rides to be ridden and then forgotten about until next time. Sure, Campos was the mother of his child, and they were friends, a kind of quiet, comfortable, companionable thing—but he’d never been in love with Campos.

It wasn’t like that with Chiara.

All of these thoughts raced through his mind within the space of a long second, and he found himself sighing and answering her. “On my way.

Loco out.” He turned over the field exercise to the battalion commander and hopped into his aircar.

Once he was cruising above the green-world landscape of Utopia, he wondered again where the world-builders had gone. The artificial planet’s ancient forests and deep, wandering rivers were unmarked by any trace of the works of humans or aliens. Unless you noticed the faint upward curve of the anti-horizon, you’d never know you weren’t on a natural planet. Obviously, there were aliens out there far older and more powerful than humans or the aliens they’d met so far. Creatures that could build a world like this, with its own mini-star with a moon in its orbit inside the cylinder. Where did they go? Why would they abandon it?

He decided these were bigger questions for bigger minds than his.

He set the autopilot and comlinked Jilani. “So what’s this about?”

“You heard about the *Hercules* being taken? With Engels aboard?”

“Sure, but I’m not cancelling training over one ship, even for Engels.”

“You mean Straker ordered you not to. I know you offered.”

“Okay, yeah, of course I offered, but he said he’d handle it.”

“Well, they just transited out. That’s why I’m calling you.”

Loco chuckled with realization. “Because now they’re not around to countermand whatever you’re planning.”

“I like a man who thinks like I think. I think.”

“This week you *think* you like that man. Might be nice to know what you think all the time.”

“What, and ruin my air of mystery?” she laughed. “How about we talk about ‘us’ later... We’ll have plenty of time to chat if you’re half the man I *think* you are.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere.”

“Good. Just hear me out when you get here.”

“You know I will.”

“Jilani out.”

Half angry, half amused, Loco restrained himself from punching the comlink panel. Instead, he took the aircar off autopilot and burned off some of his irritation by skimming low over the surface, shaving the tops of trees so close the fans chopped the leaves and twigs from the tallest branches. His HUD showed him a network of canyons on the way, so he plunged into one of them, twisting and turning among the rock formations in a fugue of concentration.

By the time he landed at the ops center he'd worked off his steam and put on a bland face. It was bad enough that Chiara could wrap him around her finger, but he didn't have to let it show in public.

She met him at the door, wearing what he thought of as her rogue trader outfit—knee-high boots, skintight black leggings and belted jacket, overlaid with a harness festooned with pouches, holsters and scabbards.

"You're ready to go," Loco said, running his eyes over her. "Lady Mayor not your style anymore?"

She turned and led him down a hall. "I find this outfit gets a lot more Breaker cooperation than a politician's beige designer pantsuit. Even so, I've been twisting the supply officer's arm for the last hour—and failing. Besides, I never wanted to be the Lady Mayor any more than Straker wanted to be the Prime Minister of the Republic. I just wanted to get my people on the right track and keep them safe."

"So what *do* you want to be?"

"Free. Back aboard *Cassiel*, killing bad guys and rescuing the innocent—captain of my own destiny." She stopped in front of the logistics office. "But to do that, I need supplies."

Loco chuckled. "Here we go again."

She stepped close to him. "And I need you, too. I want you to come with me."

"Where?"

"To find and free Engels and our people. The crew of the *Hercules*. We can't allow anyone to take our people prisoner."

"Or kill them."

"I hope it didn't go that way—and it probably didn't. Skilled people are usually too valuable to kill. We should go find them."

"That's not our job. Straker's hunting them down."

Jilani hissed in exasperation. "Since when did you become such a stickler for orders? He's heading to pick up the trail from where it happened. He'll try to chase them from there, like a dog following a scent. That's fine, but the Arattak and Korven will expect that approach. You and me, we'll work from the other end."

"What other end?"

"You'll see." Jilani pushed open the office door. Inside, supply clerks did what they'd done since the invention of writing—they sat at their desks and wrote reports.

“General!” the nearest troop cried, startled and popping to her feet when she caught sight of Loco. “I’ll tell the colonel you’re here, sir.”

Colonel Keller was already standing when Loco entered her office. “What can I do for you, sir?”

Jilani closed the door behind them as the two Breakers shook hands. “We need supplies for a mission,” Loco said.

Keller glanced at Jilani. “A military mission?”

“Let’s call it... paramilitary.”

“And under what line of the budget should I record it?”

Loco rolled his eyes. “That’s your job, Colonel. You must have some flexibility somewhere. Figure out how to make it work.”

Keller grimaced. “You have a list of what you need?”

Jilani fished in a pocket and handed Keller a sheet of—yes—real paper, of local make.

Keller took it as if it might bite and looked down her nose at it for a long moment. “Hm. Hm-*hmm*... Yes, we can do most of this...” Then she stopped and glared at Jilani with suspicion. “Two hundred liters of pure Erbaccia extract? Outrageous. That’s a month’s production. Millions of credits-worth.”

“Grown by the townspeople,” Jilani retorted.

“Processed by Breaker staff for medical use or trade.”

“Which is what we need it for. *Trade*. Possibly to trade for our people when we find them.”

Keller turned to Loco. “General, this is highly irregular.”

Loco regretted not talking this over in detail with Jilani beforehand. The woman had a way of leading him by the nose—and a tendency to rush things, obviously to increase the chance of getting her way. “Will it cause hardship to take it?”

“Not medical hardship, but it was programmed for sale, so it’s money lost. Twenty million, more or less. That means delayed maintenance, or less ammunition, or slower construction... Every credit matters now, General. Or at least every million.”

Loco could simply order it done, as he was in charge right now, but there’d be hell to pay later. Much better to persuade and get Keller on his side... “This is for a separate mission to track and rescue the *Hercules* personnel. It’s always been Breaker law that we never abandon our own—

that we send twenty to rescue one if we have to. Or twenty million. I'm sorry to disrupt your plans, but don't you think this is top priority?"

"That's all very clever, General, but numbers don't lie. Half our military equipment is inoperative for lack of spare parts or the skilled labor to maintain it. Every time we divert resources from Peter to pay Paul, we lose double. The machine of our economy sputters. Hard work is wasted. Readiness suffers. And..." Her eyes flicked at Jilani.

Loco understood the unspoken—Keller thought Jilani, with her flamboyant ways and shady past, might be skimming—or even stealing. At the least she was unduly influencing the boss for personal reasons.

He put on his most earnest expression. "Monika, we have to find out what tech they used to ambush us. That knowledge could be life or death for Breaker trade. We have to get our people back." He tapped the paper in Keller's hand. "So, use your best judgment and fill as much of that list as you can within the next three hours. I'll sign for it. I'll be responsible. Deliver it to the *Cassiel* sloop."

Keller let out a long breath. "Yes, sir," she said, snapping her heels together and saluting stiffly. "Now you shall excuse me."

Loco returned the salute and left, Jilani at his heels.

"See?" she said as she followed him out of the building and toward the airfield where the *Cassiel* was parked. "No problem. Sure wish the leading citizens of my town would take orders like that."

"Orders like that have a price I'd rather not pay."

"What price?"

"It's one thing to kick someone else's bureaucrat in the ass to get what you need. It's different when it's your own. Breeds resentment."

"All the more reason for us to get the hell out of here and into the Reach again, live on our wits. No more of this confining bean-counter crap."

"You know, I think I'm beginning to believe in your God."

"Good for you, Mikey! Why's that?"

"Because he's obviously laughing his ass off at the way you're acting just like I used to, and here I am feeling like Derek did. God's enjoying the irony."

She jumped in front of him and put a hand on his chest. "Loco, seriously. The Breakers are pros. They have competent leaders. They'll do fine without you for a while—but I won't. I need you with me, and two

shady free traders can go places a bunch of obvious military types can't. I thought you were the perfect man for the job. I know I am."

Loco wrapped his arms around her leather-jacketed waist and pulled her close. Her curves fit him nicely as he lifted her onto her toes to kiss her deeply. "If you're a man, I need to get my eyes fixed."

She wiggled against him. "Are we going to do this or not?"

"Silly question from a silly girl. I handled Keller for you, didn't I?"

"For us, Mikey. For our people. There was a townie kid on the *Hercules*—a new recruit spacer. He's a cousin of mine, Lorenzo Alfonsi. His family came to plead with me. That's the way it's done in Paradiso."

"So this is personal? I didn't know."

"When your entire world is one town and one military unit, everything's personal. Everything."

"Yeah. Okay. Let's do it. One thing, though."

"What?"

"You get the Bug. No arguments. Every fighting regular in the Breaker's has already been enhanced with it. If you and I are going to be a team, I need you to be able to keep up."

She pulled her head back, and she looked into his eyes. For a moment he thought she would argue, but then she sighed. "All right."

"Okay?"

"Okay, I said!"

"Then get your fine ass over to the infirmary. I'll meet you at the ship."

* * *

The liftoff and climb through the atmosphere of Utopia made an odd contrast with the usual planetary departure. Loco took the opportunity to gawk as Paradiso and the landscape faded below the thin layer of atmosphere lining the inside surface of the narrow cylinder. Soon, the *Cassiel* flew through inner space, surrounded on all sides by the massive Dyson construct.

Up, up toward the mini-star that provided light and heat Jilani steered, angling slowly toward the hub on the side-wall. There, she carefully slowed and floated the stubby, bird-shaped ship down the axial tube.

She guided the ship with a deft touch, almost brushing the walls. They were made with a nearly indestructible material, a carbon-structured alloy

which the brainiacs were still analyzing. If the Breakers could learn to manufacture it, they might be sitting on a goldmine—but as yet, the technology had eluded them.

Money, money, money, Loco mused. Get enough capital together and you could do anything. The Hundred Worlds had used and misused money. The Mutuality had attempted without success to eradicate it. But here, in the Middle Reach, they worshipped it.

They also fought over it and stole it and did anything they could to generate it. He could see why the Fugjios Conglomerate, the only thing that passed for an interstellar government out here, considered outright theft to be a high crime... if it could be proven, and if they considered it within the jurisdiction of their holy Regulations.

He activated the comlink to the *Independence*, floating outside Utopia. “Indy?”

“Indy here.”

“What’s it take to file a complaint or lawsuit against someone in Conglomerate court?”

“There are no courts—not exactly. They have a process to adjudicate breaches of contracts—they call this process *arbitration*.”

“How does it work?”

“The process is straightforward. If you’re referring to the *Hercules* incident, I’ve already dispatched a message drone to Crossroads with all the pertinent evidence, along with a notification that the Breakers will seek direct redress by appropriate use of force.”

“We’ve told the Conglomerate we’re going to war, then?”

“We want to highlight our compliance with the Regulations.”

Loco chuckled. “Is what we’re doing in line with their Regulations? Chiara and me, I mean.”

“Not entirely. But Paradiso citizens are not registered with the Conglomerate the way the Breakers Corporation is... and I took the liberty of discharging you from the Breakers, effective immediately.”

“Ha!” Chiara burst out, grinning. “No more General this and General that: *sir*, *yes sir*! And since I’m captain of this ship, that makes you my crew, Mikey.”

“It also means neither of you have any legal standing,” Indy said. “It’s a double-edged sword.”

“I’m used to it. Loco will get used to it, too.” She leaned across the cockpit to slap Loco on the shoulder. “We’re outlaws again! Woo-hoo!”

Loco chewed on that for a minute, and then put his boots up on the dashboard. “Cool. Thanks, Indy.”

“Don’t mention it, Mister Paloco. Good luck to you both. Indy out.”

“Here we go,” Chiara said. “Transit in three, two, one, mark.” The viewports blanked, and she closed them, then stood up to stretch, unzipping her jacket and tossing it onto the seat. “Come on, lover boy. Let’s turn down the gravity and try out my new bedsheets.”

“The bedsheets seem fine,” Loco said, lying sweaty beside Chiara in the tiny cabin, one of only two on the free trader sloop. “Now that we’ve burned off some energy, you wanna tell me where we’re going? Your crew wants to know.”

She sucked on a smokestick with a mild stim formula loaded. “The Rainbow Contractors market. Biggest one in the Middle Reach, run by the Color Mobs.”

“Color Mobs... like that Yellow Foot Mob you worked for?”

“Yeah. The Color Mobs are some of the less-evil crimorgs—they have codes of honor, they’re relatively dependable... and they don’t allow zombies at their Contractors markets.”

Loco snorted. “Criminals with a conscience?”

“People always have their moral boundaries, Mike. As long as they stay on one side, they think they’re okay. Like the bossman and you, and me—different lines, different boundaries. Doesn’t make them bad people.”

“Then why is this market run by criminals? What exactly is it a market *for*?”

“Almost anything, but the main thing it’s for is trading Contracts and Contractors—mostly Indentured Contractors. Ironclad.”

“Sounds like slavery.”

“Not quite... but it’s not always pretty. Under Conglomerate law, people are free to sell their Contracts for anything they want. Sometimes, they sell their own Contracts to pay their debts. Once the Contract is made, they have to follow it—even if it’s a nasty deal. And prostitution is legal, so... the Conglomerate figures if you make a bed, you can lie in it.”

“And this is okay with you?”

Chiara shrugged. “There’s lots of things out here I’m not okay with, but I try not to judge too harshly. I’ve known Contract Managers who treat their ICs better than some do-gooders treat their own children. Your bossman’s big on liberation, but he sees everything in black and white. There’s a lotta gray out there, and it’s where I live. I thought maybe you lived there too, but you’ve got a bigger self-righteous streak in you than I thought at first.”

“Maybe I do. So?”

“So you better put that shit aside when we get out into the real world. Bandage up your bleeding heart and be ready to fight for what we need.”

“I’ve done that my whole life.”

“But now it’s personal?” she asked.

“It felt personal when people were trying to kill me.”

“Not the same,” she said. “You’re military. That’s part of the job. How about when Ramirez started her own little people-market on Freiheit... or when Karst kidnapped Carla? How did you feel then?”

“Same as you—pissed off,” he said.

Chiara nodded. “Good enough. Keep that feeling hot, and we’ll be all right.” She put out the stick, and the cabin filled with starlight from a tiny porthole.

Loco turned the conversation over in his mind for about a minute.

Chiara made a sound of frustration and pulled his face toward hers. She kissed him, hard. “Do I have to do everything?”

Laughing, he grabbed her, and they made passionate love.

Chapter 3

Aboard the SBS *Redwolf*, approaching the Humbar system.

“So you’re sure our generators can take it?” Mara asked Zaxby for the fourth time from the Sensors station of the sloop’s circular control room. This newly expanded space combined the functions of a bridge and observation lounge. Every part of the wall, overhead and deck not occupied by fittings—keyboards, pickups and so on—was a holoscreen. The arrangement gave the impression of being on a raised quarterdeck, with visibility all around—the ancient “flying saucer” setup. It provided the illusion of standing in the open, looking out into space.

Right now, the screens showed nothing but blank gray sidespace.

Zaxby’s reply was uncharacteristically patient. “I’ve done everything I can to reduce the likelihood of an incident, Mara Straker. I estimate the odds at one in eleven thousand of not arriving where we wish. But even so, consider this: if we are thrown across the galaxy, even the universe, what wonders might we experience? What adventures might we have?”

Mara’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “If we end up in Andromeda, looking back at the Milky Way, you’re going out the airlock.”

“I hardly think that’s fair. However...” Zaxby reached deliberately toward his console and caressed a holo-input in a complex motion. “There. Put your mind at ease. I’ve set the ship to self-destruct if we arrive anywhere but the Humbar system.”

“What?”

“He’s kidding,” Steiner rumbled from where he stood, arms crossed and staring out through the transparent duralloy.

“Yes, I’m kidding, silly primates,” Zaxby said with a practiced grin. “Here goes nothing.” He tapped a control with a tentacle-tip.

The usual sense of sideways motion increased, shifted, then shifted again. Mara felt as if she was being wrenched in several directions at once... but then the sensation passed. The screens flashed briefly with stars before the chill of underspace took hold and the impellers *thrummed*. The SAI had been set to dive into underspace and change course as soon as the ship emerged.

“What did we see?” Straker asked.

“Here’s what our sensors picked up in the half-second before we entered underspace,” Mara said. The displays returned to a static scene of stars. Colored circles highlighted items as she spoke. “Here’s the Humbar primary. Here’s Humbar-3, their home planet. The rest of the planets of H-1 through H-7. We need more time to collect emissions on other ships or facilities.”

“But there was nobody near our emergence point?”

“Nobody close.”

“Okay, that worked, it seems,” Straker said. “Surface from underspace.”

“Surfacing.”

The chill receded and the screens updated. Straker paced and the others waited as Mara worked the sensors. “Here.” Highlights blinked.

“What’s that?”

Mara leaned closer to scrutinize her readouts. “A bunch of ships, near H-5, the gas giant. Lots of emissions. Lots of energy.” She turned to Straker. “I think it’s a battle, Derek.”

“Zaxby, how close can we come if we jump toward that battle?”

“To about an hour out, assuming we don’t get intercepted.”

“Can we use our changing-arrival trick again?”

“Each time we do, the chance of disaster increases exponentially, at least until I can recalibrate and check the generators. Fortunately, Murdock over-engineered this ship—but there’s no need. Our sidespace trip this time will take less than two minutes. Our enemies won’t have time to shift position to ambush us—as long as we choose a non-obvious location.”

“Just do it,” Straker said.

Zaxby set the controls. “Jumping now.”

They transited back into normal space much nearer to the gas giant. The displays rapidly populated with information.

“It’s definitely a battle,” Zaxby said. “Approximately thirty Humbar vessels appear to be defending their facilities against over one hundred Arattak and Korven warships.”

“Why the hell are these guys attacking the Humbar?” Straker’s tone indicated he didn’t necessarily expect an answer.

Zaxby rotated two eyes to focus on Straker. “The Humbar are wealthy, peaceful and defensive. Logically, that would invite attack.”

“What?” Mara said. “How is being peaceful inviting attack?”

“It is self-evident, my dear,” Zaxby said, cocking a condescending eye toward Mara. “Aggressive species like the Arattak and the Korven are always looking for rich prey. When choosing a target among possibilities, they are most likely to select the one of highest value with the least risk of retaliation. The Humbar, while reasonably well armed, have repeatedly touted their peace-loving ways, and have forsworn retaliation. They are bovines, after all—herbivores with no highly evolved killer instinct such as we have. However—and this is the key issue—they have no reciprocal military alliances with other systems. They refuse to pledge to help defend others, so they have no others to help defend them. Few in the Middle Reach try to go it alone, because this is the typical result.”

“Dumbasses,” Steiner put in.

Zaxby turned to the marine. “Perhaps. But how are they different from the Breakers? Do we have mutual defense alliances with other governments or polities?”

“We ain’t lived thousands of years in one system. I bet our chain of command is working on mutual defense alliances already—right, sir?”

Straker exchanged glances with Mara. “If we weren’t before, we will now. Mara, do you detect the *Hercules* anywhere in that mess?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean much. We’re a long way off and there’s a lot of interference—and hundreds of bogeys, counting the small craft, orbitals and so on. We need to get closer to sort it all out.”

“Get us moving toward the battle, Zaxby,” Straker said. “Configure for stealth and engage skimmer mode.”

“Going EMCON,” Zaxby said. “Stealth and skimmer modes engaged.”

“Now package up our data into a comms drone. Add a message to Commodore Gray to bring our whole fleet here immediately.”

“Cool. Let’s kick their asses,” Steiner said.

“Yes, let’s,” Mara said, an unusually bloodthirsty expression on her face.

“Again, I find myself to be the voice of reason,” Zaxby said. “Are we sure that’s wise? At best, adding our forces would result in battle-parity. We could take severe casualties—and for what? Defending someone who is not our ally, against those who are not our enemies? Are we not a mercenary organization?”

Straker stepped to loom over the octopoid, raising his voice. “We are what I say we are. Execute my orders, Zaxby.”

“There’s no need to yell, Derek Straker.” Zaxby played subtentacles over his console. “Drone away. We can expect Ellen Gray with the fleet in eighteen to twenty-four hours. Now, may we discuss this situation? We do have at least half an hour before we reach the battle and die gloriously for the cause of galactic peace.”

“We’re not going to die,” Straker said, pacing. “Record me a vid.”

“Very well.” Zaxby pointed. “Cease your movement and aim your monkey face toward the forward screen. Ready to record.”

Straker composed himself. “To all friends, trading partners and potential allies of the Humbar, greetings. I’m General Derek Straker, owner and commander of Straker’s Breakers, a mercenary corporation duly registered with the Fugjios Conglomerate. Along with this message you will find data regarding an ongoing attack by Arattak and Korven forces upon the Humbar. I realize you probably have no specific mutual defense agreements with the Humbar, but you stand to lose millions of credits in disrupted trade if this is not stopped. I’m bringing my forces to help defend the Humbar, and I strongly suggest it’s in your best interests to do so as well. Hurry. Straker out.”

“Message recorded.”

“Put that on a drone, along with our sensor data. Set it to broadcast continuously in the clear once it arrives. Have it jump to every system with Humbar trading partners or people who might help the Humbar—pick the most efficient route—and then return for recovery with any data it gathers. Make sure it swings by the Salamander system.”

“Premdor.”

“Yeah, there. How many message drones do we carry?”

“Nineteen.”

“Really? That many?”

“I wouldn’t lie about such a thing.”

Straker stopped and fixed Zaxby with a glare. “What *would* you lie about?”

“Perhaps now is not the time for that conversation.”

“Right. Anyway, package up a duplicate drone to go straight to Crossroads, and then return here after it’s broadcast a few times. That’ll get the word out. The Conglomerate might even take a hand, if they consider this a serious disruption of business.”

“Drones away. Now may we discuss why we’re doing this? How will it get Carla Engels and our other people back?”

Mara swung her seat around. “We’re doing this to help good people against bad people, Zaxby. Simple as that.”

“Do we have a policy on who are good and bad people, Mara Straker? Perhaps a handy reference guide? And, I return to my question—why is a mercenary unit intervening in a conflict without being asked? Or paid? How does this get our people back?”

Straker grinned wolfishly. “Who said we wouldn’t get paid?”

“Ah. I thought you were reverting to your foolishly altruistic ways.”

“Let’s just say my altruism has turned pragmatic ever since we Breakers ended up on our own. See if you can get me an FTL comlink to the Humbar government—their highest authority, whatever that is.”

“That would be Herd Alpha Bull Bussek.” Zaxby worked his controls and spoke Ruxin into his comlinks for several minutes while Straker paced with growing impatience. “I have Herd Alpha Cow Bussek on the comlink, translated audio only.”

“Did you say *cow*?” Straker asked.

“It’s a literal translation. There is no better appellation in Earthan. She is a senior official. Do you wish me to delay for an education on Humbar sociopolitical structure, or shall we simply speak to her?”

“Put her on,” Straker growled. “Madam Bussek, this is General Derek Straker of Straker’s Breakers. We would like to offer our military services to the Humbar at standard Conglomerate price structures.”

“We accept in principle, Herd Bull Straker,” came the odd, slow-speaking translated voice. “Please initiate defensive hostilities on our behalf as soon as possible. Transmit your proposal and we shall review it. We remind you that a conquered system is unable to pay.”

“That’s why we’ll expect half up front. Straker out.”

“Standard rates?” Zaxby said. “I withdraw my admiration. We have them over the proverbial barrel. You could have asked triple rates for speedy and effective intervention, with full indemnification for all our losses.”

“Zaxby, we have to get paid, but I’m not going to screw over people who’ve always treated us fairly. We’ll get compensated, but this could be a really good chance to establish an actual alliance, not just a trade relationship. The Humbar as a species aren’t aggressive, so who better?”

“Ah. Long-term thinking. Excellent. I didn’t know you had it in you.” Zaxby slapped his subtentacles together in a quiet, sarcastic clapping motion.

“Me too, Derek,” Mara said, clapping her hands more sincerely. “Maybe you’re not such a bonehead.”

Steiner chuckled, then froze his face as Straker pointed a finger at him with a smile and said, “You don’t have the asshole pass, Sergeant.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“Okay,” Straker continued, “we’re now provisionally under contract. Mara, review a standard mercenary agreement, adapt it to this situation, and transmit it to the Humbar. Zaxby, what does *Redwolf* have to screw with our new enemies?”

“We have a little of everything. One shipkiller missile with a big nuke. One antimatter float mine. Your choice of beam types—laser, graser, maser, particle, heat, EMP, and a couple others the brainiacs can tell you about.”

“Grav-beam?”

“A tiny one. But we do have an excellent grav-blocker.”

“Railgun?”

“A little one. Nothing big on this ship but the egos, yet we seem to have one of everything. Frank Murdock likes to play with his toys, and he’s been using this sloop as an operational testbed for combat systems. There are several other pieces of tech aboard that may come in army.”

“Army?” Straker asked.

Zaxby waved his limbs. “As I have no hands, ‘come in handy’ makes no sense. Nor does ‘tentacle-y’ in Earthan. Thus, arm-y. Army.”

Straker strangled a chuckle. “That’s some of the worst humor I’ve ever heard. Back to the people that will be trying to kill us in a few minutes—what can we do to hurt them without getting dead?”

Mara zoomed the main screen in on a ship, recognizably Arattak, but larger, with a fatter shape and two pointed ends rather than one, like a pair of cones mashed together. “Command ship. Flagship, you could say. It’s staying back from the fight with the Humbar, and there’s plenty of comms traffic with their own ships—and with the Korven frigates. Biggest bang for our buck, I’d say.”

“Can we make an underspace run?” Straker asked.

“No—these ships keep shields up all the time,” Mara said, “and shields extend into underspace.”

“But grav-beams go through shields. Do we have good schematics of that flagship?”

“Again no...but I can make some pretty good guesses based on what we know of their usual ships. Our best shot is to target the grav-beam’s focus on their fusion core and try to destabilize their magnetic bottle. If we can do that, the fusion chamber might rupture and cause catastrophic damage—or at least they’d lose main power.”

“Set it up.”

Zaxby played his board like a concert organist. “I’m programming the SAI for skim mode and automatic weapons fire. I’ll send us in a fast pass across the Arattak flagship’s stern.”

The ship went chill and the minutes ticked by as they approached the battle, skimming in and out of underspace, surfacing for fractions of a second in order to update their plots while remaining stealthy. The enemy fleet had the Humbar pinned against a low, small moon of the gas giant, a moon rich with mining and fuel processing. Its long hydrogen siphon, one which used to hang hundreds of kilometers down into the gas giant’s atmosphere, had been sliced off and its remnants lay in giant, limp folds on the moon’s surface. Other than that, damage to the facilities seemed minimal. Obviously, the attackers wanted to capture the valuable complexes.

That restraint protected some of the close-in beam batteries, but not the ones set farther away from the industry, which were being hammered by railgun fire. That was the problem with fixed weapons platforms—fast, cheap, dumb projectiles could be fired at them from long range.

The Humbar ships—heavily armed and armored, slow like their owners—maneuvered in a phalanx, a herd perhaps, trying to use massed beam fire and often their own hulls to intercept the projectiles. They stolidly accepted the impacts, but to Straker, the problem was clear. They weren’t able to hit back in any meaningful way. They fired accurate shots now and again with their beams, but they couldn’t hurt the Arattak vessels from long range, and the Korven ships stayed farther back, ready to bring in their ground troops when their allies eventually wore down the Humbar.

And the Humbar had already withdrawn several ships because of severe damage. Those hovered above the industry, taking advantage of the enemy unwillingness to destroy what they came to capture and steal.

“How long will it take for the Humbar to lose?” Straker asked as Zaxby lined up for the run on the flagship.

Zaxby opened his mouth but Mara beat him to the answer. “About six more hours.”

“Our fleet will be too late,” Straker said.

“Yes, for H-5, but not for the inner, populated worlds. Beginning the final run.”

There wasn’t much for Straker to see except the SAI’s representations synthesized from observations and predictions—the Arattak flagship growing larger and larger as the *Redwolf* approached at high speed. It looked like they were heading straight for it, but the centering pip and converging lines of the ship’s course on the piloting screen intersected just off the enemy stern.

The actual attack was over in a fraction of a second as they flashed past. The ship shook. “Turbulence from bleedover shock,” Zaxby said in response to Straker’s unspoken question.

“Did we hurt them?” he asked.

Zaxby surfaced the ship to get a good reading. A moment later the aft-facing vid sensor showed the enemy flagship—or what was left of it. Its stern was wrecked, the damaged hull streaming gasses and smoke from plasma fires, fuelled by leaking oxygen.

“Nice work,” Straker said.

“But now they know we’re here.” Mara pointed at the squadron of a dozen Korven that began sweeping the area with the aid of sensor drones, obviously looking for the attacker. A threesome of Arattak frigates moved to assist the damaged flagship.

“Skimming again,” Zaxby said as he accelerated away from the questing drones. “They know we’re out here, but they haven’t locked on. We need to keep it that way.”

Straker paced. “We can’t think defensively. Come on, what can we do to disrupt them and buy the Humbar time?”

The others remained silent, thinking. Straker figured they’d come up with at least one idea, but they still seemed reticent. “Come on, people. We must be able to do something.”

“We can do many things,” Zaxby said eventually, “but all are either ineffective, or extremely risky, with little real payoff. We struck our best

blow. Their attacks against the Humbar have slackened—but now their fleet is alerted. We are one small ship.”

Straker snapped his fingers. “Come on, come on. You said Murdock had crazy experimental tech aboard. Let’s use it. Come up with something.”

“As you wish.”

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Chapter 4

Chiara and Loco. Rainbow Indentured Contractors market.

The open-air Rainbow IC market was situated on a medium-sized water planet, near the equator on an island in the middle of a vast ocean. Its hazy atmosphere and humidity created a greenhouse effect that kept the temperature well above what was comfortable for humans. The heat hit Loco like a blast of steam as he stepped from the open portal onto the wharf where the *Cassiel* was docked like an oceangoing ship.

Chiara gave him a not-so-gentle shove from behind to get him out of the doorway, and then she sealed up the ship. She was dressed in her freebooter outfit, and Loco had on a similar rig—blades and firearms of various sorts locked into holsters and sheaths. As he looked over the crowds thronging the adjacent market, everyone similarly festooned with firepower, he suddenly wished for a battlesuit—its armor, its weaponry, and best of all, its cooled interior.

Once off the wharf and into the market, colorful canopies, awnings and freestanding roofs provided shade from the blazing sun above—usually for the buyers, sometimes for the merchandise. It wasn't as bad as Loco had feared, at least on the surface. The Contractors, some free, others in smart cuffs or control collars, while generally miserable, didn't seem actively abused.

He stopped in front of a lineup of humanoids in scanty, gaudy, revealing clothes, who writhed sinuously if unenthusiastically upon a low stage for the passing onlookers. One woman stepped nearer, staring boldly at him as she pulled open her vest to reveal four pert, perfectly formed breasts. "Buy my contract, Manager," she said in a throaty contralto.

Her plea seemed genuine. Even a Contractor had hope for a better life. Perhaps especially a Contractor.

Chiara elbowed him. "Don't gawk like a rube. Put on your tough-guy face."

"Yeah, right. Sorry."

Suddenly he felt a tug at his waist and saw Chiara move, drawing a blade and striking. His combat instincts kicked in and his blaster was in his hand as he turned to see a slight, rodent-like biped hissing and trying to close the bone-deep wound in its forearm with its other paw. Others around

drew back slightly, placing hands on their own weapons, but nobody seemed perturbed, and the wounded creature ducked and scampered off into the crowd.

“Goddamned rats,” Chiara said. “Pickpocket you bare if you let them. Funny how sentients breed true to type, no matter what people say.” She wiped off her blade and slid it back into its sheath with a *snick*.

Loco holstered his sidearm and the meandering crowd returned to normal, but he resolved to pay more attention to his surroundings and less to the merchandise from now on.

“Lady, gentleman, please, would you like to come in for a private, air-cooled showing? My Concubines are the finest in the sector. Well trained, bonded and certified,” a saurian said from the opening in a nearby tent, wringing its scaly hands.

“Thanks, maybe later,” Chiara replied.

Loco caught a chilling flash of pure hatred crossing Chiara’s face, something he’d never seen before.

She nudged him onward down the wide row.

The next segment gave a similar impression, though the creatures in the lineup were aquatic, behind a transparent slab that provided a view into a giant water-tank. Still, they seemed to be presenting themselves suggestively, seductively, even for the dry-landers who looked on along with the free amphibious and aquatic customers.

Loco saw salamanders, octopoids not unlike Ruxins, tool-using fish in mobile tanks on multiple wheels, even something that looked like a giant anemone under an inverted dome of glass mounted on a multi-legged vehicle. He’d never seen so many aliens in one place. He felt overwhelmed, and concentrated on keeping calm and looking for threats.

Ten or twelve similar booths later, after passing by hundreds of different alien species, he started to get used to it, ignoring the strangeness that he couldn’t encompass. At the end of the row Chiara turned right and proceeded down the cross-path, cutting across at least twenty similar rows. He tried to calculate how many individual merchants’ displays he’d already seen and came up with over four hundred vendors...and he didn’t think he’d seen even a hundredth part of the Rainbow Market. It must cover many square kilometers.

“The Yellow Foot specializes in Personal Services Contractors. That’s what I’m looking for,” Chiara said. “Other crimorgs handle the industrials,

the mercs, the mentals... ”

“Why do people deal with crimorgs instead of, I don’t know, licensed employment services?” Loco asked.

“Why do people get their drugs from dealers instead of dispensaries, or go to loan sharks instead of banks? For some reason, they can’t get what they want within the letter of the law, so they go outside it. If there was no demand for the service, it wouldn’t be there.”

Here and there permanent buildings rose, heavily guarded by troops of creatures in liveries of various colors. Chiara gave him a running commentary as they walked. “Purple Hand Mob.... Red Leg Battery.... Blue Claw Pack.... Here we are. Yellow Foot Mob.”

The guards here were all Mellivor, upright man-sized ferret-badgers with striped fur. They were lightly armored and heavily armed, with bright red eyes and short, twitchy whiskers. All had at least one yellow foot—a boot, a shoe, or sometimes a dye job on their naked limb.

“Stop,” one said as Chiara walked straight up to the building’s main entrance. “State your business.”

“Yellow Foot business,” she said, pulling up one pants-leg to reveal a yellow sock. She produced a metal disc with her fingers as if out of thin air and handed it to the guard. He—or she, there was no way to know—passed it leftward to another, who ran the disc through a small machine, and then said something in a hissing tongue.

“You may enter.” The disc was returned.

Inside, she divested herself of her firearms, placing them in a locker, but not her blades. Loco followed suit. They were escorted through the interior of the building.

“Let me handle the talking, and back me up no matter what I say or do, *capisce*? No matter what, or how bizarre it is,” Chiara said.

“Sure, no problem.”

Her voice grew harder. “I’m dead serious here, Loco. No matter what happens, you back me up—and you don’t freak out at what you see, even if it gets ugly. We’re not here to rock the boat or play the hero. But be ready for violence.”

“Yes, boss lady.” He made a whip-cracking gesture and winked.

Her stern expression broke into a grin and she licked her lips. “That’s entirely another scenario.”

The guards escorted them into a lavishly decorated chamber, its yellow and gold hangings with just enough other colors to provide contrast and highlights. They withdrew to the two corners behind the humans, and as they did, a door opposite opened and a matched pair of young, blonde, fit humans, a man and a woman, came in, both naked to the waist, oiled and shaved, except for the woman's neck-length hair. They knelt sideways in front of Chiara and Loco, the man farther away, and then they placed their palms on the floor, as if ready to play horse with children. They didn't make eye contact.

Loco observed, puzzled.

While they did this, Chiara took out an auto-injector and stabbed its needle into her left hand, and then put it away.

Before Loco could ask, the door opened again and a monster entered the room.

A Korven. He'd seen enough dead ones to know.

Chiara growled as Loco bristled. He forcibly stilled himself from reaching for a weapon, remembering her repeated insistence he play it cool.

The Korven was small for his race, perhaps two meters tall and one hundred twenty kilos, with smooth skin like fine greenish-gray leather. His face—for he was certainly male—was full of fangs, and where hair on a human would be his head was covered with brutal flat spines like shark's teeth. Similar spines defended his knuckles, elbows and knees, which were bare. He wore a cuirass—a sleeveless vest of black armor—and a fan of the same material formed an articulated kilt around a massive protruding codpiece. He carried two long knives in sheaths crossed over his sternum.

Wouldn't want to meet this guy in a dark alley, Loco thought as he remained balanced on the balls of his feet, ready to act.

Chiara threw her shoulders back and put her hands on her cocked hips. "Pillage and death to you, Lutan Krahn."

The Korven's voice was surprisingly melodious and cultured, and his Earthan was excellent. "Pillage and death to you as well, Jilani Captain. One thing I always admire about you is your courtesy. Shall I sit?"

"You shall do as you will in your own domain, as is right and just."

"So I shall. And you shall remain standing and bow."

"Bow, lower than I do," Chiara hissed out of the corner of her mouth and then bowed at the waist, about halfway to the horizontal.

Loco bowed lower, feeling foolish.

Lutan Krahn sat on the man's back, and lifted one boot to place it on the woman's shoulders. A spur on the boot cut her smooth skin, but she bore it stoically. The blood seeped and dripped on the floor, unremarked. "Your servant is unschooled, but I will forgive him for your sake."

"He is not my servant. He's my lover, a free man and a peer—and more dangerous than his pretty face would imply. I vouch for him."

"You wish him to become Yellow Foot?"

"No, a Recognized Neutral only. And, I must also regretfully reduce my status to that of Distant Associate, under the Codes, in order to gain greater freedom to act."

"That is your right. We will honor the Codes. There is much affection for you here."

"I thank the noble Krahn for his accurate acknowledgement."

The Krahn waved a diffident hand. "Yet you failed in your last commission."

"I did not succeed, but it was not a disaster. I will accept judgment."

The Korven showed surprise. "Even as a Distant Associate?"

"I don't wish it to be said that I reduced myself to Distant Associate to avoid punishment."

"You are noble, for a human." He smiled a toothy smile.

Chiara showed her own teeth. "Would a Korven do any less?"

His reply seemed heartfelt, even affectionate. "How I wish I could implant you."

Loco froze instead of reaching for a blade, reminding himself that these were only words, words from a bizarre creature in an utterly unfamiliar culture.

Chiara laughed delightedly. "How I wish I could cut off your member and feed it to you, so you bleed to death begging for my death-stroke."

Lutan inclined his head. "As you are so polite, I will be merciful in my judgment. I fine you five thousand credits and the loss of a fingertip of your choice. You are hereby reduced to Distant Associate at your request, with no prejudice and in good standing. Do you accept my judgment?"

"Gladly." She reached into a pouch and pulled out a packet, tossing it to the Korven. "Pure Erbaccia molecular extract. Worth ten kay at least."

He caught and opened it, sniffing the contents deeply. "Your fine is paid."

Chiara picked up a fine yellow decorative cloth from a small table and wrapped it tightly around her left middle finger, holding it up toward Lutan Krahn as if insulting him with the rude gesture. She then drew her sharpest blade and sliced it off at the first joint, catching it deftly with the knife-hand. She tossed the fingertip directly at the Korven.

He caught it and popped it into his mouth like a snack, chewing and swallowing it with obvious relish. “Nicely done,” he said. “You remain my favorite living human.”

“And you’re the only Korven I might regret killing.”

“I will tolerate that insult...this time.” Loco thought that if Lutan were human, he would have winked.

“Your tolerance is legendary.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Lutan turned his face to Loco for the first time. “So this is your lover. I should kill him for his effrontery.”

Loco, having caught the spirit of the interplay, spoke up. “You’re welcome to try, Lutan Krahn. I am Paloco General. Pillage and death to you.”

“Pillage and death to you, Paloco General. What is it you wish from the Yellow Foot?”

Interesting, thought Loco, that Lutan would ask him instead of Chiara. “Information, great Krahn, for which I’m willing to pay a fair price. You know of Straker’s Breakers?”

“I know of your mercenary organization. I know you are a high officer. You would not be Jilani Captain’s lover if you were not a man of virility and ferocity, despite your tiny implantation member.”

“You’re correct about the first part....” Loco paused. “Recently, a trading ship of ours, the *Hercules*, was taken by a force of three Arattak ships—and one Korven. The Korven ship appears to be official and military, not rogue or...”

“Or from the now-defunct Korveni crimorg. It is because of your Breakers’ ruthless destruction of the Korveni that I give you respect—that and my affection for Chiara-*chama*.”

“As you should. We figure some of the crew of the *Hercules* will be forced to sign contracts against their will, and we’re hoping you can use your sources to locate some of them—or at least keep your eyes open for them if they show up here.”

“I will do better than that, Paloco. I will endeavor to obtain any of your people I locate, if you will pledge to purchase their Contracts from me at fair market prices.”

Loco considered. The Breakers had a no-ransom policy, but this gave him some wiggle room. He noticed that Lutan didn't say he would buy any Breakers he located, only “obtain.” Buying Breakers from a rescuer technically didn't violate the policy. Besides, these were Breakers, and Breakers took care of their own.

“I thank you for your generous offer, and pledge the Breakers to pay you fair compensation for your expenditures rescuing any Breakers or Breaker, ah, associates, as well as their Contracts. Furthermore, the Breakers will offer fair market value for recovered equipment and goods, if you choose to sell them back to us.”

“Agreed.” Lutan put his feet on the floor, slashing the woman under his feet with his spurs yet again. His clawed hand clutched the shoulder of his male stool-human as he stood, drawing even more blood, which he idly licked off his claws with a black, oily tongue. He turned to go, still with a finger in his mouth as a man might pick at something stuck in his teeth, before suddenly pausing to look over his shoulder. “One more thing—I almost forgot.”

“Here it comes,” Chiara breathed, barely audible. “Whatever you do, don't kill him. And don't let him kill you.” She swallowed.

Loco's senses heightened as he put himself into a Kung Jiu combat state.

“I cannot do business with an Unproven,” Lutan said.

“I understand,” Loco said.

“Good. Humans are notorious for misunderstanding.”

As he finished his sentence, Lutan turned and drove a kick through the man-Contractor on the floor, which lifted him and sent him flying at Loco. Loco ducked, and then Lutan was on him.

Chapter 5

Bridge of the *Redwolf*, Humbar system.

Zaxby's idea to attack the enemies of the Humbar was completely crazy and utterly dangerous, Straker thought as the octopoid explained the possibilities from his spinning, Ruxin-configured stool on the *Redwolf*'s elegant bridge. Most of the time Zaxby's fears were overblown, but in this case, he might be right. The idea of a reverse Pascal's wager—big bet, small payoff—loomed large in his mind.

"There's got to be a way to improve the odds," Straker said. His gaze roved from face to face—Zaxby, Mara, Steiner.

Mara threw up her hands. "Maybe not, Derek. There isn't always a way to do everything. Some things are simply impossible."

"I refuse to believe that."

"And that attitude has done amazing things—but sometimes stuff just can't get done—at least, not in the time we have."

Straker paced. "Let's go over the plan one more time. Maybe we can fix it."

"It's not a plan, Derek. It's nothing but a wild idea."

"Go over it again anyway. Zaxby?"

Zaxby brought up graphics. "The wild idea-plan is simplicity itself. We enter underspace and use the gravity blocker to penetrate the enemy's shield."

"And then we blow them up with antimatter," Straker finished for him.

"Along with ourselves," Zaxby added. "Given the slow shield pass-through, we can't overrun the congruency point at a speed high enough to avoid catastrophic bleed-over."

"Then we use a nuke."

"Same problem."

"With a delay, then," Straker insisted.

"The nuke has to be laid in the small empty space between the enemy shield and hull, as it won't detonate if it emerges within solid matter. If we are even able to do it—an unlikely proposition—enemy point defenses are likely to destroy it immediately."

"Likely, but not *certain*."

Zaxby held up a single subtentacle to emphasize his point. “We only have one nuclear weapon.”

Straker put his fists to his temples. “We have to try!” Once more he suppressed his rage and fear at Carla’s capture, forcing himself to concentrate on the problem at hand. One thing at a time. Save the Humbar, which should lead to capturing some enemy to question, which should lead to the *Hercules* and the lost Breakers...

“Why can’t we use the grav-beam instead of dropping a bomb?” Steiner asked. “Zap their fusion bottle, like with the flagship.”

“Grav-blocker will block our own beam,” Mara replied.

“Grav-blocker gets us through the shield, but we can turn it off once we’re inside, right? Then back on to get out?”

Mara stared for a moment at Steiner, and then turned to Straker. “That might do it. Lots of variables, precise timing—but at least if it doesn’t work, we don’t blow ourselves up.”

Straker made a sound of frustration, rolling his shoulders and swinging his arms as he paced. “There has to be something better. We need a fresh idea. Zaxby, list the tech we have on board.”

“Very well. Fusion drive. Impellers. Laser—”

“The alien tech, the weird stuff, the bleeding edge.”

Zaxby referenced his screen. “Hard and soft shields. Grav-blocker. Grav-beam. Tractor beam. Pressor beam—”

“What? Tractor and pressor?”

“Very weak beams to push and pull objects—variations on the grav-beam, which is misnamed, since what we’ve been calling the grav-beam is actually a weapon that twists and shakes rather than merely pulls—”

“Okay, so we can push and pull stuff a little.”

Zaxby sighed. “Yes, as I said, very weak. Nothing that can be weaponized. Shall I continue?”

“By all means.”

“Expanding energy shell.” Zaxby paused, as if fully expecting Straker to stop him. “Like the salamanders have.”

“Too weak?”

“It’s strong enough to detonate incoming missiles and do minor damage, but again, the issue isn’t the weapons tech itself—it’s the size and power generating capacity of this corvette-sized ship, which is insignificant when

compared to the frigates and cruisers we face. We are a piranha—but we are faced with sharks.”

Straker rubbed his neck. “Go on. Brainstorm, everyone. Think of something, some combination—like you did, Steiner. That was good.”

Steiner nodded and furrowed his brows.

Zaxby waited a moment, then continued. “Shieldbuster.”

“What?” Straker glared at Zaxby. “We have a shieldbuster?”

“A tiny, experimental one,” Zaxby replied patiently. “Not enough power to take down the shield on anything bigger than an attack craft. We simply cannot rely on raw power to accomplish anything, with the exception of our single nuke and our single antimatter float mine. As we did against their flagship, we must use guile and trickery.”

“Guile and trickery...” Straker mumbled. “What else?”

“We have a piece of self-organizing subquantum J-tech.”

“J-tech?”

“This name is derived from the word ‘jain,’ a term meaning, approximately, ‘universal,’ or perhaps ‘ubiquitous,’ with overtones of ‘victory,’ in a dead Old Earth language. The modern term, J-tech, refers to the concept of self-organization, an idea much discussed but never empirically demonstrated until the Mindspark device. Whether the device actually—”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute, Zaxby. We have a piece of the Mindspark device aboard?”

“We have a miniscule piece of subquantum J-tech matter Murdock salvaged from the *Victory* and isolated, after we used the device to disrupt Vic as we were assaulting the flagship and rescuing Carla Engels the second time. We do seem to be making a habit of rescuing her.”

Straker scowled. “That’s because she makes a habit of taking unnecessary risks.”

“Said the obsidian pot to the stygian kettle.”

Mara spoke up. “Good question, though—what can we do with a piece of J-tech?”

“We could float-drop that into an enemy ship instead of antimatter,” Steiner rumbled.

“With no idea whatsoever of the effect,” Mara replied. “We might be handing the Arattak a baby AI that could spread and unbalance the entire Middle Reach! Unleashing real, non-theoretical J-tech could create the most

dangerous form of self-organizing life ever known, so no, we're not doing that."

Straker thought about asserting his command to tell Mara *he'd* make such decisions, not her—but as he agreed with her, he didn't bother. The older he got, the more he realized he had to pick his battles—especially with the women in his life. "Mara's right. We can't unleash J-tech—but can we use it ourselves somehow?"

"Not unless you want to infect our own SAI," Zaxby answered, "and try to raise it from a baby to some form of effectiveness within the next few hours—another low-probability strategy, I suggest."

"Fine, fine. What else?"

"Rejuvenation chamber. FTL comlink—"

"Back up—what? We have a rejuvenation chamber aboard?"

"Affirmative. It is our autodoc, medical bay and regeneration tube all in one, and incorporates the best subquantum reorganization tech Murdock and I were able to perfect."

"So what's the difference between that and the J-tech? It's subquantum, right?"

"It's the difference between an organ of your body and a virulent, self-replicating organism. One has a structured, controlled purpose, while the other is wild and unpredictable, possibly destructive."

"Right, right."

Mara spoke thoughtfully. "I used subquantum medical tech to develop the Breaker Bug. It allowed me to go deeper and do more, faster, than standard genetic engineering."

Straker snapped his fingers idly, *pop-pop-pop*, pacing with his head down, suddenly struck with an idea. "So wait, wait." *Snap, snap*. "The rejuvenation tank is so advanced, it can make people younger—physically, anyway—without affecting their brains."

"Actually, we don't alter the brains of people we've used it on," Mara said. "We tried on some animals, and their minds degenerated shortly after the process. The brain already functions at the subquantum level to a certain extent, and any disruption degrades memories, personality, skills... no, all we do is rejuvenate all the rest of the tissue in the body, except the brain—which means there's probably a limit to how many times it will work. The brain will eventually get old, but the young body keeps it younger longer."

“So can it make someone’s body into something else entirely? Like, could it turn a human into a Ruxin? Or what looks like a Ruxin anyway?”

Mara blanched. “Ugh. Now we’re getting into bizarro territory. That would be really hard. We’d have to do a lot of research on Ruxins, how their physiology could support a human brain, or... ”

“No, no, never mind. Not a Ruxin, then—that was just a random thought—how about a superior human?”

“Superior how?”

“For certain purposes. Like, could you give me armored skin?”

Mara crossed her arms and sat back. “Sure. You’d lose sensitivity and flexibility—”

“And could you change me back?”

“More or less. It all depends on the unintended consequences—and without extensive testing, there *will* be unintended consequences.”

Straker clapped his hands together. “All right then. I know what we’re going to do.”

After he explained, Mara objected vehemently.

An argument ensued, until Zaxby interrupted. “I have a better idea. A much better idea.”

“What?”

“Are you familiar with the story of Frankenstein’s monster?”

* * *

The small antimatter explosion lightly seared the hulls of the two survival pods, sending them sailing through space on a tangent to the enemy fleet. The flare of energy drew their attention—as expected—and two ships, an Arattak and a Korven, moved cautiously toward them.

As they drew near, they directed powerful multiphase scanning pulses at the pods, which were transparent by design. Inside, the scanners saw nothing unusual—nothing but life support systems and two humanoid occupants, both with very faint life signs—and several quantum-locked credit disks in each.

As expected—as hoped—the avaricious aliens moved in to recover the pods, eager to acquire information, material, money, and a couple of captives.

Aboard one pod Straker lay, apparently strapped down to immobility. He'd insisted on it as a part of his plan. The scans would show his helplessness, decreasing the chance the enemy would simply blast the pods out of hand.

That, after all, was the biggest danger.

That would ruin his day, he told himself with a morbid chuckle.

That's why he'd included the credit disks as well. Nobody blasted free money if they could help it.

From his low metabolic state—one he controlled with his mind—he heard and felt the pods being recovered. He hoped he'd be taken aboard an Arattak ship, but odds were it would be Korven. The Korven were better equipped to handle prisoners, more eager to seize them.

Though his eyes were shut, he could see dimly through his modified eyelids. Zaxby had wanted to add an additional nictating membrane, but Mara had vetoed the idea, as any extra body parts would need time for Straker to practice controlling—time he didn't have.

So, though his body was heavily modified by the rejuvenation module, he didn't have extra arms or tentacles or anything else like that.

What he did have, as the Korven discovered when they opened the pod, was an exoskeleton, making him look like an insectoid, an Opter—or a man with smooth armor over most of his skin. His joints and flexible areas were articulated, like a medieval knight's suit of plate. Their scans would reveal all of this was completely natural, making him appear to be an unknown species of alien humanoid, sharing DNA with humans, perhaps, but not some kind of created being with artificial armor slapped on.

Yet, that's what he was—at the cellular level.

The Korven immobilized Straker with fiber-tape, and then unstrapped and lifted him out to set him on a table. He perceived he was in a medical facility, or perhaps a biological research lab—or maybe it was the same thing. Two Korven watched him with weapons ready, while two others ran tests.

Straker had hoped for some indication Steiner had been recovered too—hoped both of them would be extracted from their pods at the same time and in the same place—but he hadn't seen any indication the Breaker marine was nearby. He resolved to stay passive and gather information as long as he could while they ran their tests.

That passivity ended when they unstrapped his ankles to spread them as one of the researchers lined up an anal probe. Old Earth tales of alien abduction ran through his head as he kicked his heavily modified body into high gear.

“Steiner!”

Straker’s internal bio-radio got no response from his fellow modified human.

His double hearts surged oxygen-rich blood through his veins. New glands dumped naturally produced battle cocktail into that blood, five times as powerful as adrenaline. His own genetic speed and training, plus the Breaker Bug for strength, made it a simple matter for him to twist his wrists, forcing the restraining tape to yield enough for him to bring his razor-sharp claws into play, slicing it.

Now free, he grasped the solid table and somersaulted backward, flying toward one of the guards who thought himself in a perfect position—above the prisoner’s head—to shoot him if he attempted to escape. That guard was alert and fast, lifting his weapon and squeezing the trigger even as Straker’s feet hammered him in the chest. The blaster bolt struck Straker in the leg—and ricocheted off his armor, armor of extruded biological duralloy, armor harder and denser by far than anything nature ever designed.

As the Korven went down under the impact of his driving heels, Straker arched and spun like a cat, using a clawed hand on the wall behind him to land on his feet. He caught and twisted the blaster out of his opponent’s grip and quickly aimed it at the other guard.

That guard, also a skilled, dangerous opponent, fired first. His only mistake, a natural mistake, was to aim for the escaping prisoner’s center of mass instead of his head. Straker’s thick chest plate easily shrugged off the spectacular bolt of plasma.

Straker didn’t make the same mistake. His precise shot took the armed Korven in the face, avoiding the possibility the soldier’s body armor would save him.

The drugs in his system, his biotech, in fact his entire combat-redesigned body, speeded his time-sense, making everything around him seem to slow to half speed. This allowed him to easily finish off the researchers. They seemed like clumsy oafs as he shoved their own anal probe up under their chins and through their brains.

“Steiner!” he radioed again.

“I’m up, sir,” the response came.

“Kill them all, as fast as you can. No quarter.”

“Roger wilco.” Straker thought he heard relish in the big marine’s voice.

It gave him great satisfaction to destroy Korven. As far as he could tell they had no redeeming features, other than their combat abilities, which he could respect as a warrior even while wishing them all slaughtered.

Those abilities wouldn’t save them this time. He felt like an avenging angel, like a god in some showvid about Greek heroes—like Hercules, the son of Jupiter, he thought with a chuckle. Ironical, considering the name of the lost transport.

In the passageways he found no automated defenses. Those were his main worries, machine-fast weapons with armor-piercing rounds, or powerful lasers, but he thought them unlikely. The arrogant Korven, as close-combat and boarding-assault specialists, would see no need for them.

Turned out he was right.

With a blaster in each hand and a captured bandolier of grenades he sliced through his enemies. Each of his precisely aimed shots killed a Korven. He felt like he couldn’t miss. He felt like a mechsuirer shrunk to man-size, as if his body were a mechanical, brainlinked thing. It was the super-chemicals singing in his blood and nerves, combined with a lifetime of combat training. He knew it wouldn’t last, but for a short time, he was pure death on two legs.

He mowed them as a reaper scythed through wheat.

When a lucky shot glanced off his armored cheekbone, he paused long enough to remove a combat helmet from one Korven and lower it onto his own head. Its face shield inhibited him slightly, but now he was as invulnerable to their infantry weapons as if he were wearing a battlesuit.

In fact, he was a *living* battlesuit.

His assault on the Korven ship became a minutes-long blur of murder. At one point he was aware of another battle taking place somewhere nearby, but he was in such an intense killing state, in such a perfect Zen flow of destruction, that he barely noticed it.

Shoot, shoot again, stab, shoot. Shoot some more. Rip a helmet off with claws and shoot what was behind it. Bat a grenade back toward its owner. Toss one of his own down a passageway. Drive a duralloy-clawed hand—claws with molecular blades like nothing in nature—through the gap below a Korven’s abdominal armor. Dodge an antitank rocket—the only thing that

might hurt him—and put a bolt into the nose of the launcher tube, destroying the threat. These motions became his whole world, his zone, his fugue state of perfect flow.

Everything that approached him died.

The warrior in him rejoiced.

It was glorious.

It was intoxicating.

It was a song of consummate carnage. He bathed in fire.

A snippet from some ancient text floated through his brain: *I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.*

And then another: *Death is the solution to all man's problems.*

No man, no problem.

No Korven, no problem.

He found his mind able to think about other things as his body went through its perfected motions. Music played in his head, some kind of symphonic composition, lending a serene purity to the explosions and blood—the purity of cleansing. The Korven, their entire race, their species, was a blight upon the Middle Reach, upon the galaxy. Along with their allies, it was blisteringly obvious they should all die for their crimes, all and to the last.

Straker would be the agent of their eradication.

At some level he was aware his thought processes were far from normal, far from his usual self, but it really didn't matter. He'd become the inevitable agent of his own intentions, his mind and body pre-programmed by himself to destroy his enemies in an unstoppable orgy of annihilation. At this point he had no more control of himself than someone in the final throes of sexual ecstasy—and it felt much the same.

For a timeless moment he mused upon the close relationship between sex and death, creation and destruction. Between actions such as his enemies kidnapping his wife and comrades, and their inescapable consequences—the removal of the perpetrators from the universe. These lifting, spinning thoughts only stuttered and stopped when he found no other enemies, no other living beings aboard the ship, other than Steiner covered in the gore of his opponents. His mind slammed to a halt like a roller-coaster finishing its exhilarating run.

Straker found himself breathing deeply as his perceptual world collapsed to something like normal. He dropped one blaster and raised his

empty hand. “Steiner! Stand down, Sergeant. *Jurgen!*”

Steiner, who was shuddering and aiming his own weapons at Straker, lowered them. “Sir. Sorry, sir. I was... ”

“Yeah. I know.” Straker looked around at the mess, at the knee-deep dripping slurry of offal, and felt his own modified body, its many inconsequential wounds, its rapid healing, its growing hunger. He—they—needed food, desperately. “Follow me.”

He found his survival pod. After he and Steiner stuffed themselves with nutrition concentrate, he retrieved a data stick hidden inside. On the alien ship’s bridge, he plugged it in to a console and unleashed the malware Zaxby and Mara had programmed. Within seconds, the ship was under his control, the displays and controls reset to Earthan language and symbology.

The screens told him four other Korven ships had converged and grappled to this one, had poured troops aboard only to be slaughtered by the two remade men. Even now, the skeleton crews which remained on the grappling ships would be trying to figure out what had happened, trying to absorb this stunning setback, trying to decide what to do.

As it was already inside the Korven computer systems, using their own encryption, the malware easily leaped across the Korven comms and unobtrusively took control of the four grappled ships. From there, it datalinked to every other ship it could and infected them as well. The Arattak were unaffected, but within moments, all Korven ships in the area were compromised.

It was a success beyond all hope. Straker had expected he and Steiner would be overwhelmed and killed eventually, after causing a great deal of disruption, but he’d provided for the possibility of success.

Then he wondered why he’d done it, if he didn’t expect to survive. It was one thing to take a big risk for a big payoff, but this—this near-certain death merely to disrupt, possibly destroy a few Korven assault cruisers—seemed crazy. It was a blow to their enemies, of course, but hardly worth throwing away his life.

His life... his life...

Straker shook his head, shook off bizarre, intrusive thoughts while he programmed the ships he now controlled, instructing the SAs to ram-grapple their Arattak allies, and to issue orders to the Korven troops to board and seize. He had no idea whether the Korven would follow such odd and unexpected directives relayed via their automated systems, but he

hardly cared. His plan—Straker’s plan—*why did he think that way, from outside himself?*—the plan, *the* plan, had already worked beyond Straker’s wildest dreams.

Straker’s plan.

As he entered the last instruction into the system, a trigger was tripped and the curtain rose on his memories.

He remembered opening his eyes in the rejuvenation tank and looking up at Straker—the other Straker, the original, unchanged Straker. He gave the original a thumbs-up. Straker had held out his hand to lift him—a bizarre, temporary combat-optimized suicide-clone of himself—from the machine. Because he was who he was—at least as long as his mind held together before its inevitable breakdown—he had no problem with how he’d been made.

A golem.

Another man might have been furious that his life would last less than a day, would be expended like a bullet, but not Straker.

Not this Straker.

Not any Straker.

He did it for the Breakers—for his friends, his comrades, and his honor. But mostly for Carla and his children.

His family. Straker’s family. They would continue. He would not.

He was at peace with that, and held onto that thought all the way to the end as he sent his Korven ship hurtling toward another Arattak cruiser. Before the spiders reduced the vessel to slag and him with it, he broadcast a final message in Earthan, in the clear.

“Tell her I loved her. Tell her I loved her my whole life.”

On the comlink he heard Straker—that real Straker—clear his throat. “I will, brother.”

Chapter 6

Loco and Chiara at the Rainbow Indentured Contractor Market.

Despite Lutan's deadly attack, Loco had already decided to leave his blades in their scabbards. Molecular edges could kill, and Chiara said killing wasn't the goal here. Instead, he concentrated on defending against the Korven's rush, twisting aside so they both slammed up against the wall with their shoulders.

Lutan's spiky hands reached, the right for his face and the left for his groin. Loco brought a knee up and across, blessing his ballistic skinsuit as the Korven's claws shredded the leather on his thigh, but failed to penetrate. He hammered aside the hand reaching for his face, and then grasped one of his opponent's thumbs, twisting. If the bone structure was similar to a man's...

A human would've been in overwhelming pain, but the submission hold had no effect on the Korven. Loco followed through with leverage until Lutan's thumb-bone broke.

At this, the Korven's left hand came up in a disemboweling stroke. Again the skinsuit saved Loco as he rolled with the blow. With Lutan's broken thumb still tightly in his grasp, Loco rotated and spun, attempting to drive a reverse elbow into his opponent's jaw.

He missed as the longer-limbed Korven drew back—and then, suddenly, Loco found himself holding a bloody, detached thumb.

Lutan took a further step back and held up his other, undamaged hand. "Hold," he said.

Loco found himself breathing heavily, his heart pounding and the bruises on his thigh and gut already making themselves known. The crumpled wreck of the kicked Contractor lay unmoving against a wall, with the woman cowering above him in helpless protectiveness.

Slowly, Loco raised the thumb, the size of a fat jumbo prawn, its claw like a chitinous tail. Willing himself utterly stoic, he held Lutan's eyes, licked its bloody end and smiled—and hoped like hell that the Breaker Bug would take care of any diseases or poisons.

Lutan laughed uproariously, a slithering, coughing fit of amusement. "I declare you worthy, Paloco General. You are a fit mate for Chiara-*chama*." He opened his left hand and tossed something at Loco's feet—a dagger.

One of Loco's knives, which he'd ripped off Loco's harness with his gut-strike, unnoticed.

Loco replied by chucking the thumb to Lutan, who caught it with his left hand and held it up to examine it.

"I thank you for its return. It will save me some time in the regeneration process."

"And I thank you for this." Loco scooped up the dagger, far less valuable than a thumb, he thought, and slid it through his belt. "It will save me some time carving up my next Korven."

"Take care to wear your armor when next you try."

Loco inclined his head, acknowledging the Korven's point. Without the skinsuit, his guts would've been all over the floor. Breaker Bug or not, that would've hurt like hell. "And incidentally, I'll take the Contracts for these two as spoils of battle." He gestured at the man and woman.

"As you wish. I gift them to you." Lutan licked his lips. "Until our next meeting, Breaker." He whirled and bludgeoned his unwounded arm against the door, smashing it open to slam against an unseen wall, exiting the room with a roar toward his attendants.

Only then did Loco remember the presence of the Mellivor badger-guards, who'd remained motionless in the corners. They alertly watched the four humans.

There would be only three humans, if something wasn't done soon. The man looked to be in a bad way. "What medical facilities do you have around here?" Loco asked.

"Not the best, for Contractors, but there should be something," Chiara replied. "The problem will be getting him there alive. Pick him up gently."

Loco crouched and lifted the young man, carrying him like a baby in his arms. He didn't like the way he felt bones grate—and the kid's face was gray and sweating. He barely breathed.

"You two, guard us," Chiara said imperiously toward the nearer pair of Mellivor.

"You are a Distant Associate now," one replied. "You have no authority."

She reached into a pocket, drew out coins and placed them in his hand. "How about now?"

The badger jingled the coins, handed some to the other, drew back his lips. "Now, you have bodyguards, mistress."

“Good. Lead the way out of here to the nearest Contractor doctor.”

“Yes, mistress.”

“Why can’t they treat him here?” Loco asked as they hurried down the corridors of the Yellow Foot facility.

“Yellow Foot doesn’t waste money on Contractor doctors or medical machines. Cheaper to let them die, most times. For the rare exception, they outsource.”

As they stepped outside the building, the badgers strode in front, clearing the way, while Chiara brought up the rear. The young woman, barely twenty under her excessive makeup Loco thought, scurried along, sobbing now and then.

Five minutes later the badgers showed them to a white pavilion with several red symbols on it. Medicos in full robes, including cloth head-coverings, hurried to show Loco where to lay the injured man. A young green humanoid of indeterminate sex, with rippling fur on its face, examined the patient, pulling sensors on retractor arms down from where they waited above. The woman-Contractor held his hand and continued crying.

The green person motioned to an insectoid, who examined the readings. The two conferred in an unknown speech. Loco didn’t bother to stick in his comlink for the translation. He let Chiara handle the situation while he kept his eye on security. After the fight and all that had happened here in the Contractor market, he felt on edge, his nerves buzzing, waiting for the next menace to appear. The badgers appeared to be doing the same, but more professionally, as a matter of routine.

“I’m sorry,” the green one said. “The patient has not survived.”

The dead man’s companion wailed and shook him, but he remained unresponsive.

“Can you revive him?” Chiara asked with a raised voice.

“Not with the machines we have here. Not in time. It is unfortunate, but he has passed into the Great Beyond.” The two medicos performed identical hand-motions, something like Chiara’s people made when crossing themselves, yet different. “The Creatorix has reclaimed him.”

Chiara sighed, and handed them coins. “Thank you for your efforts, Siblings. Here is a donation for your Order.”

The two bowed in thanks. “What do you wish for the husk?”

Chiara addressed the blonde, clear-skinned woman. “What’s your name, honey?”

She turned her face to Chiara, makeup smeared from crying, and said, “Belinda, Manager.”

“Call me Captain. Captain Chiara Jilani.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“You have a choice to make, Belinda—a choice I never got. I know you’re not used to being asked, but today’s your lucky day. You can stay here. We’ll void your Contract and you’ll be on your own. Maybe you can join the Order of Saint Zorizma here as an acolyte. They’ll train you as a medico, and maybe you’ll eventually take your vows. It’ll be an interesting and relatively safe, peaceful life... probably. Or, you can come with us, which will be exciting, violent, and dangerous.”

“I get to choose?” Belinda said.

“You get to choose.”

She reached out to touch the body, and then drew back as if from an electric shock. “My brother is gone. I am alone. I—I choose you.”

“Why?” asked Chiara.

“You don’t want me?”

“No, I’m just asking why, honey, *why*? I want to make sure your head is on straight.”

“Because...” Belinda glanced fearfully at the medicos. “No offense to the Siblings here, but I... I wish to be among humans.”

The medicos bowed as if to say, no offense taken.

“Fair enough,” Chiara said. “Although don’t assume that humans are always your buddies either—or that aliens aren’t. Do you want some time with him to mourn?”

Belinda lifted her chin, and Loco saw there was still some pride under her degradation. “I’m fine. Let’s go, Captain.”

“Let them treat your wounds first.”

The medicos did, pressing on quick-seal bandages.

“Now give me your arm,” Chiara said. She removed a palm-stunner from her harness and adjusted its settings.

Belinda held out her arm.

Chiara laid the stunner on a spot and triggered it, causing Belinda to jump as if stung. “There, your implant is wiped. You’re free.”

“My Contract is void?”

“The official one. Between us, you’re now part of my crew. That means you work and you get paid and you do what I damn well tell you—understand?” She said this last kindly, belying her harsh words. “Of course, you can quit at any time. That’s the difference between a Contractor and an employee.”

“I—yes, Manager. Captain, I mean. I’ll work hard for you. And for...” She turned to Loco.

“Loco,” he said. “Nice to meet you. I’m sorry about your brother.”

“I will miss him.” She tried to hold back tears, but failed.

“Okay, enough weeping,” Chiara said gruffly. Loco thought she hid a tear of her own with a turn of her head. “Back to the ship.”

The badgers led the way, shoving aside the few who didn’t clear the path.

As they walked, Loco leaned toward Chiara. “What was all that with Lutan? Seems a bit excessive and in-your-face, even for here. And he said he wanted to implant you?”

Chiara laughed. “What he was really saying was he wanted me to bear his offspring... but Korven have no sex.”

“Seems like it’s about all they think about, from Lutan’s words and those pictures all over the Korveni compounds.”

“That’s ironic, coming from you. No, I mean they’re biologically asexual. They have no gender. There are no males or females.”

“Lutan seems to believe he’s male—the worst kind.”

“I can see why you’d think so. Like many things, it’s not what it seems—and it’s rooted in biology. To reproduce, they implant living creatures with their embryos, using a probe between their legs. Later, the critter rips its way out of the host, usually killing it.”

“Ugh. That’s...”

“Not the weirdest or creepiest thing in the galaxy, believe me. But to Korven, that’s sex and reproduction. In fact, it’s taboo for them to have sex with or implant each other. They have to do it to some other host creature.”

Loco’s eyes unfocused, trying to imagine... “That’s sick and murderous. But can’t they use animals? Or with modern tech, remove the embryo before it kills the host, and save both?”

“They have taboos against implanting animals, kinda like ours against bestiality and cannibalism—but it’s not unknown, sure, in a pinch. And they do sometimes save the host for re-use...” Chiara absently rubbed her belly.

Loco stopped and grabbed Chiara's shoulders. "Gods and monsters—he didn't—"

She shook loose. "Don't go grabbing me, and no, he didn't. Quit trying to shoehorn Korven or any other alien sexual practices into the morality you consider normal. And, as with every other species, he says polite things he doesn't mean because it's expected."

"I got the feeling he *meant* that crack about implanting you."

"Only in the nicest way... for a Korven. It means he thinks I'm an ideal host; it doesn't mean he actually wants me dead—any more than when you spend your money, you actually want it gone."

Loco let out a long breath as they reached the seaside docks, hundreds of small ships floating in the marina. "I gotta tell you, I don't give a rat's ass about Korven morality or respecting their viewpoint or whatever, if that's what you're trying to say."

"Nope. They're slimy and evil—but so are some humans, and sometimes we deal with them. I try to leave my feelings out of it."

"But you'd have no problems if I say I'd like to wipe out every fucking one of them?"

"None whatsoever," she said.

"Good. Because they make me sick."

Chiara shrugged, looking bleak. "Me too. Get used to it. It's a big, ugly galaxy."

On the dock next to the placidly floating ship, Chiara made as if to dismiss the Mellivor, when the leader of the two began speaking with a hissing voice. "Captain, we're free for employment. Non-Contracted, at-will only."

Chiara snorted. "You want me to hire you long-term?"

"Lutan pays shit."

"He always was a cheap son of a bitch."

The badger showed many teeth. "I'm Brock. This is my cousin Raj. We're personal security specialists, Conglomerate-registered." He offered her a credential, which Chiara scanned with her handtab. "We like the way you guys operate."

"Your Earthan is pretty good," Loco said.

Brock tapped his skull. "Language chip. Over one thousand speeches and dialects. Cost me a bundle, I'll tell ya. I thought it would get us better

pay, but turns out most bodyguard employers don't give a crap about languages—they just want alert, bonded shooters.”

Chiara caught Loco's eye and stepped away a few meters to converse privately. “What do you think?”

Loco shrugged. “We have room on the ship... but do you trust them? Seems pretty convenient.”

“Oh, they're probably on Lutan's payroll too. He wants to keep an eye on what I'm doing, and they'll happily take double pay.”

“Yeah, but why?”

“Short answer? Lutan rescued me from hell and took a liking to me. For that, I owed him, was Contracted for a time... but the debt's paid. Only, he still thinks of me like a pet... or a lover he can't have. He's unusually disciplined for a Korven, which is why he's done so well in Yellow Foot. Most Korven have no self-control when it comes to aliens in their power. The average Korven would've implanted me when he had the chance, and I'd be long dead.”

“Okay, so... why even consider hiring these badgers?”

“Because they give us options, and cover, and muscle... and they keep Lutan happy. Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer. We might need help from him later. Information on where to find our people, if nothing else. Also... ”

“Yeah?”

“Lutan inspires fear, but not much loyalty. If we can turn these guys, they'll be useful.”

Loco shrugged. “This is your territory, hot stuff. I'm just the big dumb jock, remember?”

“You're not dumb, Loco—just inexperienced. A couple years out here and you'll be a streetwise rogue like me.” She hooked a thumb at herself to emphasize the point. “And you got the instincts. You handled Lutan perfectly.”

“Thanks.”

Chiara walked back to the badgers. “Boys, you're hired, standard rates. Get your gear, give your notice to Lutan, and come back here ASAP. We'll be on the ship until we get some word on where to go next.”

“Yes, Captain.” The two marched away, leaving Belinda wringing her hands.

Chiara hugged Belinda in a sisterly fashion “Come on, honey. Let’s get you settled. You’re a little smaller than I am, but I bet you can wear some of my stuff.”

Later, Loco confronted Chiara alone in their cabin. “Um... ”

Chiara gave him a challenging stare. “What?”

“Bunking arrangements for Belinda?”

“You worried she’ll cramp your style?”

“Well... ”

“I already told her. She can sleep with the badgers.”

Loco leered. “Not literally, I hope.”

“Yes, literally... not figuratively, you mean.”

“Whatever.”

“Show some compassion, Loco. She just lost her brother, and all you’re thinking about is sleeping with me.”

He grinned. “That’s all I ever think about.”

Chiara grinned back, in spite of herself it seemed. “Compliments will get you everywhere. But seriously... be serious.”

Loco mock-saluted. “Aye aye, Captain, ma’am.”

“She was a Contractor, Loco. Now she’s crew. This is a step up. So... be nice. But not too nice.”

“Jealous already? Maybe we should leave her here.”

Chiara made a face. “We can’t do that. I’m fine. Do I look insecure to you?”

Loco knew better than to answer.

Chiara shrugged with elaborate casualness, but it wasn’t entirely convincing. “It’s a free universe. I saw you eyeing her. She’s cute. If you like her better, that’s up to you. I don’t want to be a ball and chain, Loco. I want someone who wants me because that’s what they choose—and who knows what they want.”

“You’re the only one I want. You ought to know me well enough by now to realize, that’s a big change for me.”

“I’m supposed to be grateful?”

Loco sighed and crossed his arms. “No. Just give me some credit. People can change.”

“Not in my experience,” she said.

“Okay, maybe I was waiting for the right one to come along.”

Chiara rolled her eyes. “Let’s keep things as they are for now. Now get to work prepping the ship. Lutan gave me a lead on our people. We lift in an hour.”

Loco got to work.

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Chapter 7

Aboard *Redwolf*, Humbar system.

“The golems worked far better than expected,” Straker said in a thick voice. He stopped pacing to press himself against the rail separating him from the wraparound holo-screens on the *Redwolf*’s luxurious bridge. His body crackled with suppressed energy, and he longed to leap into the combat mission his surrogate—his golem—had executed so skillfully, so nobly. The sacrifice—a sacrifice he himself would make if placed in such a position—moved him, made his heart swell with warrior pride. “They kicked ass.”

“Yeah,” Mara said, her tone satisfied. “They did.”

“Why don’t I feel good about it?” Straker asked. “It was a sick thing to watch.”

Zaxby spoke like a teacher, lecturing. “The emotional reactions of you various humans accord with your personalities. Derek Straker sees the honor in a glorious, violent, meaningful death saving others—even when the action is performed by a doomed golem. But he also senses the moral ambiguity inherent in creating a sentient creature formed as a weapon, intended for expenditure like a warhead.”

Mara rolled her eyes. “I think Derek was asking a rhetorical question.”

Zaxby echoed the eyeroll with all four of his, and a comic flair beyond Mara’s ability. “Of that, I am well aware, but it amuses me to clarify you humans’ often-muddy thinking on these ethical matters.”

“Don’t forget me,” Steiner rumbled. “And my guy.”

“He died just as nobly,” Mara said.

“Easy to die nobly when it’s not you doing the dying,” Straker said.

Mara scowled. “That makes no sense. And remember, you approved all this.”

“I know. That’s why I’m feeling conflicted.” Straker flexed the hands gripping the rail. “I guess it’s hardly different from sending young troops on a suicide mission. How about we concentrate on what the golems... what our warriors accomplished?”

“A wise suggestion,” Zaxby said, “Eight Korven and two Arattak ships destroyed at negligible cost.”

“I don’t like to call it *negligible cost*. That would demean their sacrifice.”

Zaxby drew himself up on his seat, elongating his rubbery body in order to keep his eyes level with Straker’s. Had he been a human, Zaxby would be looking down his nose at him. “Sixteen hours ago the two golems did not exist. When we created them, we knew their natural lifespans would be measured in days at best. The subquantum genetic engineering was quick and dirty—an appropriately colorful and descriptive phrase. They were created. They fulfilled their functions. They are no more—gone the way of all flesh. The only significant thing that has changed is that we have destroyed seven enemy ships and hundreds of hostiles. Think dispassionately rather than emotionally, and your minds will remain tranquil, like mine.”

“That’s enough,” Mara said sharply as Straker’s face threatened further argument. “Focus on the mission. What’s done is done.”

“Yeah,” Straker said, calming himself. “We still have at least nine hours until our fleet shows up. What else can we do to hurt them and relieve the Humbar?”

Zaxby brought up the current tactical situation around the gas giant. “While we have bought time, the Humbar won’t last nine hours. They’re down to twenty-five ships, most of those damaged, versus more than eighty for the attacking forces. And, while quite satisfying, the destruction of Korven ships will not save the Humbar. It is the Arattak who are clearing the way for the Korven ground troops to seize Humbar territory. We must find a way to slow or divert the spiders.”

“Master of the obvious,” Steiner muttered.

“As I said before, I find stating the obvious can help clarify our thought processes—even the weak and slow thought processes of substandard neurotypical grunts like you.”

“I’ll show you weak and slow, squiddley,” Steiner said, spreading his hands and advancing on Zaxby, who rose in sudden alarm.

“Stand down, you two,” Straker snapped. “Zaxby, you need to learn when to shut the fuck up. Steiner, don’t let him get under your skin. Both of you—all of us—we need another idea. We have all got this great tech. Let’s figure out a smart way to use it. Give the enemy another surprise.”

“Not with all these sensor drones all over the place,” Mara said, gesturing at the displays. “We can’t get anywhere close to them—and they

won't fall for another life pod trick. They're shooting anything that comes near—even little fist-sized asteroids."

"Then let's destroy their drones. Zaxby, start taking them out. Shoot and scoot. Keep at least some of the enemy working on finding us, worrying about us, while we keep thinking."

"If it's thinking you want, Derek Straker, I suggest turning over the piloting to Mara Straker and the shooting to you or Jurgen Steiner. I will retire to my water tank and cogitate."

Steiner bristled. "That's bullshit, you lazy—"

Straker overrode Steiner. "That's fine. Go think by yourself. We'll brainstorm here."

"Thank you." Zaxby withdrew, Steiner glowering at him.

"Mara, you can pilot this thing with all the stealth mode and skimmer settings?"

"Sure, no problem."

"Then Jurgen, you're on the maser cannon. It'll slag their electronics and it's harder to pinpoint than a laser. Start picking off drones while we wait for Zaxby to come up with something."

Mara moved to the copilot's station and said, "Why do you think it's going to be Zaxby?"

"Because it usually is. I don't keep him around for his winning personality. If that motivates you to think of something yourself, then great."

"And what will you be doing?"

"The usual. Drinking caff and pacing." Straker got each of the others a mug-full from the fancy on-demand multi-drink dispenser. Then he filled his, sipping as he stalked the spacious circular command deck. He let his eyes roam idly over displays and controls and tried to relax, letting his mind wander while Mara piloted and Steiner fired the maser. Mara could've easily handled both tasks, but it gave the marine something useful and satisfyingly destructive to do.

His thoughts turned back to the rejuvenation tank and the seductive possibilities of golems. No wonder Mara, Zaxby and Murdock had been reluctant to spread that tech. It was far ahead of its time, existing only because of the underlying principles of the Mindspark device. Humanopt clones and the zombies of the clone-slavers were bad enough. At least they

took time and effort to design and grow them, and years to raise them into something that could pass as human.

The rejuvenation tank had done it in hours. It had built a body and made a cheap copy of his mind.

But, that had been a one-off, a unique and desperate circumstance, never to be replicated.

Unless things get desperate again, the devil on his shoulder whispered.

It had worked, but deep in his gut, it made him sick. That was the price of command. Doing what needed to be done to win, because losing wasn't an option.

To help change his mental track, he called up a list of ship systems, ordinary and experimental, trying to spark an idea. Many times an idea was less a matter of originality than of combining existing things to make something new, using old principles in novel ways. Underspace... antimatter... grav-beam... tractor beam... energy shell... shieldbuster...

"If we approach in underspace, what will they do?" Straker asked Mara.

"Move. Avoid us. With detectors, they can see us but we can't see them. They might shoot at our congruence point, but really, all they have to do is stay out of the way."

"What happens if we fire our shieldbuster from underspace?"

"Nothing. Energy fired in underspace is absorbed by the dimension. In fact, underspace is one big power sink. Before you ask, the energy shell won't work either. Skim mode lets us quickly pop out, fire and pop back in, but that's a technique, not a tech. They're forewarned, so skim mode won't save us from getting blasted at the point of attack."

"And we only have one underspace generator."

"Two, really—there's one on the shipkiller. That makes it a fancy underspace torpedo. We can probably kill one ship with it."

"Can we make more?"

Mara laughed. "No, far too complex."

"What if we use the rejuvenation tank as a kind of... three-D printer? Using non-organic material?"

"Hmm. Might work for small parts, but we're not going to suddenly mass-produce torpedoes. Still... that's got me thinking..." Mara started working furiously on her console, muttering.

A few minutes later, Zaxby entered the bridge with less of his usual, somewhat fishy smell, indicating he'd disinfected and deodorized his water

suit. "I commend you for your insight," he said to Mara.

"Derek got me thinking... hey, what do you know about it?"

"Of course I was monitoring your conversation, and I'm brainlinked to the *Redwolf*'s systems, so I can see what you're working on."

"Great. Think you can do it?"

"Indubitably. I've already set the module to produce miniaturized underspace generators."

Straker's head swiveled between the two. "For what?"

The two spoke at once, but Mara raised her voice. "Shut up, Zaxby. My idea. We have a lot of defensive mini-missiles in an aft launcher. We'll replace some of their warheads with tiny replicated underspace generators."

"And do what?"

"Create distractions, at least. They'll see a bunch of underspace signatures zooming around and react. They can't afford to assume they're harmless."

"But they *are* harmless. Like the fake cannon soldiers made on Old Earth. Quaker guns, they called them."

"Essentially. But it will buy some time."

Straker chopped his hand in the air. "Anything is better than nothing. Do it. And keep thinking."

* * *

The distraction bought an hour—an hour of breathing room for the Humbar, an hour closer to the possible arrival of Commodore Gray and the Breaker fleet.

Straker considered using *Redwolf*'s single shipkiller to take out one more enemy vessel. His military instincts told him to hold it in reserve for the right moment, though, rather than simply knock the opposing count down by one. But now, he found himself and his crew in the same position as before... until the detectors beeped with bogies.

"What the hell is that? Our fleet?"

"Inbounds... well off the plane of the ecliptic... no, not us," Mara replied. A moment of analysis later, she added, "Thorians."

"Thorians, huh?"

Zaxby stroked his console while turning one eye toward Straker. "Why do you pointlessly repeat stated facts?"

“Isn’t it a play from your own book? I’m helping to clarify your thinking.”

Zaxby wobbled two eyes at Straker. “*Touché*. Mara Straker is correct. Thorians. Their radiation signatures are unmistakable. Eight Thorian warships, of battlecruiser class. Fast, lightly armored for their size, but heavily armed.”

“Comlink them.”

“Attempting FTL comlink. No answer. They’re several light-minutes away, but I have also sent a conventional comlink attempt.”

“Any guesses which side they’re on?”

“They’ve always been enigmatic,” Zaxby replied, “not surprising in a highly radioactive species that tends to kill most organic life on contact. Yet, they’re not expansionist, and politically they’ve always been defensive.”

“Like the Humbar.”

“Maybe the Humbar have a secret alliance with the Thorians,” Mara said. “They’re heading at full speed straight for the Arattak.”

“Stand off,” Straker said. “If they fight, we’ll look for an opportunity to help. If they join the spiders...”

“Then the Humbar are really screwed.”

Straker frowned. “If the Thorians attack, how will a fight stack up?”

“The enemy still has the advantage in numbers and firepower, but if the Thorians make a hard, fast pass, they can hurt the spiders and get away, buying time. The more time the home team has, the more likely help will arrive.”

Zaxby pointed at the holotank. “The Arattak—and the remaining Korven ships—are turning to run for sidespace. It appears they’re not allied with the Thorians.”

It was true. As one, the enemy ships rotated and blasted at full acceleration for the nearest flatspace.

“Yes!” Mara cried. “They’ve backed off!”

“Celebration is premature, Mara Straker,” Zaxby said. “While a combination of our efforts and the timely arrival of this new element has caused the enemy to withdraw, we are no nearer to finding the *Hercules* or her crew.”

Straker glared at the holotank. “Can we go to skim mode and catch the rearmost spider?”

Mara answered. "Easily. This baby is *fast*."

"Do it now. Zaxby, ready the shipkiller, the grav-beam, whatever it takes. I want you to disable that cruiser. Take out her engines and weapons, cut her out of the herd and get her left behind."

"You want intelligence. Prisoners and access to the spiders' information storage. It will be dangerous. They *will* fight back, and you are heavily outnumbered."

"We've got to try. You brainiac pilots handle the space fight. Steiner and I will suit up. Whatever it takes, whatever the risk, cut out their legs, and get us aboard."

Straker bolted off the bridge and into the cargo hold where the battlesuits were strapped. On the way he comlinked Steiner to join him.

"This is more like it," Steiner said as he stripped to his skinsuit and fitted himself into his open Ripper. "They won't know what hit them."

"Keep in mind, we're doing this for intel. We need some of them alive, especially bridge crew or officers."

"How long do spiders live when I pull their legs off?"

"I worry about you, Jorgen."

Steiner grinned wolfishly. "No worries about me, *Herr General*. Turn me loose and watch my back. This is all I ask."

"Roger that, Sergeant." Once Straker brainlinked into his suit and was fully integrated, he comlinked into the ship channel. "Zaxby."

"Here."

"Status?"

"About to attack. I suggest you wait in the cargo airlock. When I open the outer door, you are clear to assault. I also suggest you tap into ship sensors in order to keep yourself apprised of the situation."

"Got it."

They moved into the airlock and closed the crysteel door behind them. Straker used his VR-HUD to watch what was happening beyond the hull.

Skim mode made the picture in his mind blink on and off—cold to warm and back, vision to blindness, off and on as they dipped in and out of underspace. Ahead, the tail-end Arattak cruiser ran at full fusion power, following in the wake of its faster fellows.

Straker was glad it wasn't a Korven at the rear. Korven would be much tougher to board.

His viewpoint raced forward as the *Redwolf* caught up. The cloud of cooling drive plasma behind the enemy fleet masked the stealthy ship completely. The enemy appeared utterly unaware of the danger. In fact, it had dropped its shields, no doubt for extra impeller power.

Straker could feel Zaxby and Mara as they instructed the ship's systems to line up and fire the grav-beam. Its twisting energy was aimed not at the engine's main fusion bottle—disrupting that would likely destroy the ship, as with the Arattak flagship—but at the rocket plenum, the chamber where the fused plasma ignited booster isotopes to create the most efficient reaction mass possible.

Disrupting this process hyper-heated the chamber and exceeded its capacity to contain the energy. As soon as the plenum deformed even slightly, the process of degradation accelerated so quickly—in a fraction of a second—that it exploded. The blast took two meters off the back of the spider ship, causing automatic shutdown of the associated power generation systems.

This left the enemy drifting ballistically, on battery power alone, at least until the systems were rebooted.

In that precious window of seconds, Zaxby used the *Redwolf*'s lasers to disable all of the enemy's weaponry. Straker felt Zaxby engage the tractor beam and the two ships slammed together, locked in a deadly embrace.

As soon as they stopped shuddering, the airlock doors opened.

Straker could hear Steiner roaring with the anticipation of battle as his own awareness shrank back into his suit. Zaxby must have cut off his ship feeds, and rightly so.

Straker followed Steiner out onto the hull. He ran across the skin of the ship and onto the much larger Arattak cruiser. A circular hole, cut precisely by the *Redwolf*'s laser, flashed in his HUD—Zaxby's guidance.

Steiner spotted it too, and hustled to enter. Straker saw blaster fire and followed the marine through several sticky interior membranes that sealed themselves after every shot.

The inside of the spider ship was bizarre, devoid of any sense of up and down. It was filled with fabric tunnels and expanses of webbing, some manufactured, some apparently natural. Barely visible lines of light laser fire slashed across these structures, a few striking Steiner without apparent effect.

Simple infantry weapons couldn't easily take down a battlesuit.

In response, Steiner fired at anything that moved. Unfortunately, most of what moved was not actually a spider—it was fabric, webbing, lines, and debris floating in zero gravity. Some of the webbing sputtered with guttering flame, showing there was oxygen present.

Straker let Steiner be the focus of enemy worries and concentrated on sorting out the confusing situation. He told his SAI to backtrack all fire and give him vectors of its probable origin. With this information he was able to blast through the gossamer sheets of webbing and destroy the defenders behind.

Until a blast of golden energy enveloped Steiner, disabling his battlesuit with a web of crawling lightning.

Straker's SAI immediately pinpointed the source—a metal warbot—or maybe it was a spider in a battlesuit. His blasters aimed and fired as if of their own volition even while the conscious part of his brain identified it. Pummeling it with shot after shot, he drove it into a bulkhead and destroyed it.

“Steiner, you okay?”

“*Jawohl*, Herr General. Some small damage, major system shock. I rebooted.”

Straker shot and killed two armed spiders. “Now we need to capture some prisoners. Switch to lasers.”

“Roger that, sir. Where's their bridge?”

Straker used his HUD mapping mode to give him a picture of the interior space. “Follow me.”

At what looked like the control center he found three unarmed spiders. They had fancy markings on their pink fur, and appeared to be hardlinked into the ship via cables. Straker used his lasers to cut the cables. “Zaxby, do we have translation software?”

“Of course, General. It's already installed on your suit. Simply switch on your speakers.”

Straker did so, “You, spiders. Surrender or die!”

The spiders spread their limbs, showing empty “hands” formed of feathery fingerlike structures. “We surrender.”

“Zaxby, can you get into their computers?”

“I'm on my way with my equipment. Don't let them touch anything.”

One of the spiders was slowly, casually reaching toward a console. Steiner fired his laser and sliced off the offending limb, chuckling.

“Don’t move,” Straker said belatedly. “The next one of you who tries anything will lose more than a leg.”

Zaxby soon arrived, festooned with gear. “This is fascinating. It’s my first look at the interior of an actual Arattak ship. It will yield a wealth of knowledge.”

“The only knowledge I care about right now is where our people are.”

“Fortunately, my superior brain can handle caring about more than one thing at a time.” Zaxby selected connectors and plugged boxes and modules into various ports on the Arattak control boards, and then wired his own brainlink into the cobbled-together network, closing his eyes. “Hmm. Hmm. Interesting. I think I can... hmm.”

Zaxby talked to himself like this for some time. Five minutes went by, and then ten. Steiner began twitching with impatience, and Straker was about to bark at Zaxby when he opened his eyes. “I’ve bypassed their security and copied their data. They tried to delete it, but they don’t use a one-command system wipe like we do.”

“Good job. Do you know where our people are?”

“I know where the *Hercules* was taken. We can depart now.”

“Let’s go,” Straker said.

Steiner lifted his laser to aim at a spider. “What about these guys?”

“We don’t murder POWs, Sergeant. Leave them for the Thorians or the Humbar to collect and interrogate.”

“That’s no fun.”

“Zaxby, can spiders regrow their limbs?” Straker asked.

“With regeneration technology, of course.”

“And will they survive having a couple lasered off?”

“They will. Unlike you primates, superior beings like me or these arachnoids do not keep vital amounts of bodily fluids in their vulnerable limbs.”

“You never miss the chance to take a shot, do you?”

“Not when presented so temptingly, no.”

Straker sighed through his teeth. “Sergeant, shoot their hands off. That’ll ensure they don’t try anything funny before they get picked up.”

Steiner’s voice smiled. “*Wunderbar*.” With several cheerful slashes of his laser he chopped off the limbs of the spiders that served as hands.

The creatures screamed and writhed in pain, and then fainted and curled into tight balls. Straker felt no guilt. They deserved far worse for

kidnapping Carla and her crew, and for allying with the even-worse Korven, whose crimes were heinous and widespread.

Back on the *Redwolf*, well away from the Humbar, the Thorians, and the crippled Arattak ship, Zaxby presented his findings. “Interestingly, the *Hercules* was boarded by spiders, not by Korven as one might expect. The Arattak seem to be the senior partners in this alliance. Perhaps they wished to exercise the right of first seizure. They took off eleven males. The twelfth—the weapons officer, Bortmann—is listed as ‘celebratory.’ I believe that means they had the Arattak version of a victory dinner, with him as the main course. The ship—and the females—were turned over to the Korven.”

“*Lieber Gott*,” Steiner said. “They...”

“Don’t say it,” Straker said, feeling his heart sink. “Zaxby, do we know where they sent the women?”

Zaxby aimed all four eyes at Straker. “Unfortunately, they sent them to Hell.”

Chapter 8

Loco, aboard *Cassiel*.

Loco glanced over at Chiara as they sat in the cockpit of the *Cassiel*. The ship droned through sidespace on her way to the Mechrono system, where Lutan's information said some of the *Hercules* personnel had been contractually sold.

Chiara caught Loco's movement and twitched, but didn't return the glance.

Okay, she was still in a mood. She had b`een ever since they'd lifted off. Ever since the conversation about... about them, their relationship, whatever it was.

"Chi—"

"Save it," she snapped.

"Why are you mad at me?"

Chiara muttered something under her breath.

"What?"

She blinked rapidly, several times.

Could that be tears? Loco couldn't believe it.

"I said," she began, then broke off, "...no, it's my fault. I'm not mad at you alone—I'm mad at myself."

"What? Why?"

"I'm..."

He waited. A minute at least ticked by, but he resolved to wait her out.

"It's complicated. If I let myself talk about it right now, I'll say something I regret. So just drop it and concentrate on work, *Mister Paloco*."

"What work, *Captain*?" He gestured at the steady displays, the formless void outside the crystal viewport.

Chiara pushed herself up from the chair. "I got stuff to do in the hold. You're on watch. Read up on Mechron and the Mechrono system."

He took a deep breath, let it out. He decided not to push. "Okay."

Fortunately, the trip to Mechrono was short—six more uncomfortable hours. He occupied himself as his captain had ordered, reading and watching vids on the Mechrono system. He laughed at himself as he ruefully thought about her "orders." Hell, she sure *thought* she was in charge. Guess she was—it was her ship after all. Still, it'd been a long time

since anyone but Straker had ordered him to do anything in such a preemptory tone.

The Mechrono system was a weird place, even for the Middle Reach. Some kind of machine intelligence claimed and controlled the entire star system—an SAI, it seemed, or perhaps a highly reclusive, literal-minded true AI. Its name translated as Mechron, and so the system was called Mechrono.

The AI seemed to be centered on a massive, planet-sized artificial station in close orbit around its enormous type-O blue star. Mechron flew strange, spherical ships, which appeared like reflective bubbles of electromagnetic force. These patrolled the area rigorously, examining visitors and destroying any who broke the AI's rigid rules.

Fortunately, most of those rules had been worked out by visitors from brutal experience over millennia of observation—because Mechron never communicated except through its arbitrary actions. It never comlinked, texted, vidlinked or messaged in any way. Instead, any violation of its rules resulted in instant destruction for the violator. Over time, people had worked out a pretty good set of things not to do.

On top of that, just to keep things interesting, the AI would occasionally do something outside of the known rules set. It was like living with a capricious, uncaring god.

The main rule seemed to be a prohibition on use of high technology—use of, not mere possession. Ships using fusion drives—which were basically reaction rockets, no matter how the energy and expelled plasma was generated—seemed safe. But if any captain dared to turn on an impeller—a reactionless drive, far more sophisticated and efficient, though inherently limited in thrust—the results were disastrous. An invincible bubble-craft would quickly render the ship into its component molecules by means of disintegration-beams of unknown type and incredible destructive power.

Also prohibited were destructive weapons more advanced than conventional explosives. Or shields, or armor reinforcement, and a long list of other things.

Basically, if the tech was in use in Old Earth's twentieth century, it was probably safe. If more advanced... destruction was imminent.

Every now and again somebody would mount an expedition to study Mechron. They'd send robot ships with lots of sensors, make attempts to

provoke behavior and exhibit technology that could be studied. Mechron foiled them all. It wasn't some mindless computer which could be played with over and over, like a videogame SAI opponent. Its responses were not entirely predictable, and it seemed to have a sense of patience—patience that would wear out quickly from repeated offenses.

Mechron also learned, and it never forgot what it had learned. Attempts to return later, even decades later, after some disastrous experiment, seemed to bring on more disaster. Every species that interacted with the machine might as well be ants attempting to understand and analyze the human village they lived beneath—a seemingly impossible task. Some speculated Mechron was composed of multiple AI personalities—a society rather than a single entity—which might explain some of its unusual properties.

Loco wondered whether Indy might be able to make some progress. Perhaps only an advanced AI could understand one of its brothers.

By the time they were half an hour out, Chiara seemed her old self again and acting as if there was nothing wrong. Loco resolved to play it cool too.

“So why exactly are we going to Mechrono, other than the fact Lutan told you some of our people had been taken there?”

“Other than?” Chiara gave him a flat stare. “That’s the whole thing.”

“Come on. You never tell everything you know.”

“Mikey, you don’t want to know everything I know.”

He had a sense she was disappointed in him, that he’d again failed some vague test. Was it just that she’d been battered so much by life that she felt she had to constantly act superior, as a defense mechanism? And why was he even worrying anyway? He ought to just write her off as relationship material, complete this mission and move on to someone else.

Bullshit, he thought. Unfortunately, his heart had a mind of its own. For now, he’d just play it cool.

“What was that?” she asked, and he realized he’d muttered aloud.

“Nothing,” Loco said quickly. “Can’t you give me any more intel?”

“I’ve never been here before. We’ll both be feeling our way through it. In fact, if it weren’t for our people, I’d stay the hell away from this system. Visitors die here. A lot... though I *have* talked to a few people over the years who come to trade.”

“With the AI?”

“No, with the natives,” she explained. “Or inhabitants, I should say, as they’re probably not actually native. They live on Mechrono-7. They’re

intelligent plants. Nasty creatures when they want to be. They use non-plant Contractors to do some things they're not very good at."

"See, there's info I could use. Keeping everything so close-hold is pointless."

Chiara chewed that over. "You're right. Sorry. I'm used to working alone. Never had a partner I could trust."

"Well, you can trust me—in every way."

"Why?"

"Huh?"

"Why can I trust you?" she demanded.

"Uh..." His mind skittered away from saying anything about love.

"Because I'm totally loyal to my friends."

Chiara picked at a nail, avoiding his gaze. "Is that what we are?"

"Gods and monsters, what do you want me to say? I like you, a whole lot, very much, more than anyone ever. That makes us friends—plus benefits, plus more if you want it." This last slipped out despite his better judgment.

"More if I want it?" she asked. "What's that mean?"

He sighed. "I thought you told me we weren't talking about 'us' right now?"

"You're right, we're not. But okay, I guess you're my *friend*, even if you're not a Breaker anymore."

"I'm both. Discharging me is just a legal fiction—and you're a Breaker too."

Chiara turned to him with genuine astonishment on her face. "Me?"

"Of course. You and all your people. Everyone under Breaker protection is a Breaker. So you're also my sister-in-arms, which doubles down even more, right?"

"Right." She rubbed at the corner of her eye, turning her head away slightly and breathing deeply. "Sorry."

"For what?"

"Nothing."

Loco wasn't sure what had just happened, except that the atmosphere had lightened. He felt like he said something right this time—thank God.

Then he laughed at himself for using that phrase. Thank *God*. Whether or not he believed in the God of the Italians—the *Catholics*, they'd insisted on being called—it seemed more concise and natural than saying

‘Unknowable Creator,’ more personal. It made him wonder about the military society he’d been raised in, and how it had programmed him with assumptions from infancy.

“So, anyway,” Chiara said as if nothing had passed between them, “the inhabitants, the plants I mean, they call themselves The Living. Animals like us—biologically speaking—are Halfers. They consider us only half-alive, since we’re not rooted in soil, and that unlike themselves, we have fixed lifespans. Machines, they call Unliving.”

“What do they call Mechron?”

“Mechron, or so it translates. Might as well be a god, it’s so powerful within the system.”

“But they must have machines, Unliving things, right? Since they have a name for them, I’m sure they use them. How do they reconcile using machines with being ruled by one that’s like an Unliving god?”

Chiara chuckled. “Every society, religious or not, explains away or ignores blatant contradictions if they need to.”

“Breakers don’t.”

Chiara turned to face him. “You’re joking, right?”

“Not meaning to...”

“Okay, here’s a few of the top examples of Breaker bullshit I’m aware of,” she began. “One, you say we’re all Breakers in Utopia, but sometimes we’re not. When there’s some military decision to be made, I have to hear about it afterward, and try to butt in as the Mayor of Paradiso, because nobody bothers to inform me or the city council. Two, Straker claims to be upholding constitutional rights, but we have no constitution—we’re just using whichever parts of the Earthan Republic constitution we all kinda agree on, and thank God he’s not a tyrant, but who knows if he will eventually become one, because power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Three, we’re supposed to be a free and equal society in town—it’s written in the original expedition charter—but I’m still dealing with a patriarchal subculture that doesn’t much like having a woman in charge. They keep citing ‘tradition,’ as if that excuses it.”

Loco raised his palms. “Hey, that last one has nothing to do with us Breakers.”

“I know—not blaming you—just showing you how there’s hypocrisy everywhere. Why do you think aliens should be more rational or less hypocritical than humans?”

“Yeah... I guess so. I’ve seen how weird Ruxins can get... though they think *they’re* normal and we’re the weirdoes.”

“Normal is all local, Mikey. Here’s a quote I heard: *Everyone’s weird but you and me—and even you’re a little weird.*”

“Am not.” He grinned. “Okay, maybe a little.”

“You’re missing my point—or making it. I’ve been dealing with aliens my whole life. I guarantee you, humans are just as weird when you view them from the outside. From the inside, everything thinks they’re the normal baseline standard. The Living see themselves that way. Here’s a factoid for you: whenever a new society is discovered, human or alien, most of the time their word for themselves translates as *The People*. Which means...”

“Which means everybody else isn’t. Okay, okay.”

Chiara waved her hands, emphasizing her words with gestures—something she’d been doing more and more the longer she was among the Italians again. “The Living see themselves as the normal people, the chosen people blessed by Mechron, dwelling at the center of the universe. Everybody else are half-people—Halfers.”

“Not so different from how the Korven, or the Arattak, or the Opters see humans.”

“Now you’re getting it,” she said.

“How does that help us get our people back?”

“I’m not sure yet, but you wanted to know more about where we’re going, so I’m telling you. I’m trying to give you information. Briefing you, as you military types call it.”

The arrival chrono countdown beeped a one-minute warning.

“Thanks. Here we go,” Loco said, turning back to his copilot dashboard. “Barring someone waiting to ambush us like they did the *Hercules*.”

Chiara checked over her piloting readouts and took the controls in her grasp. “In this case, Mechron is a good thing. I hope it won’t allow ambushes within its territory.”

“Hope ain’t a plan.”

Brock poked his head into the cockpit. “Raj is on the tail gun,” he said.

Loco twisted to look at the badger. “Tail gun? We have a tail gun?”

“Yup.”

He switched his glare to Chiara. “And I’m not manning it because...”

“Because our mercs are already checked out on it, and they’re crack shots.”

Loco digested that. “Okay. But wouldn’t it have been smart to get me checked out on this until-now-secret tail gun sometime during this trip?”

“It wasn’t a secret. I just forgot to say anything. Sorry. I’m...”

“... used to working alone and keeping your mouth shut. Yeah. Let’s try to update that attitude, can we?”

Chiara’s petulant lips pursed. “I’m trying. Emergence in three, two, one...”

Fortunately, the tail gun proved unnecessary. Neither passive sensors nor the simple, primitive radar pulse they sent out found anything nearby.

Until Mechron showed up.

“What the hell is that?” Loco pointed at an unbearably bright pinpoint that rapidly enlarged. The viewports darkened to almost opaque in response, and the viewscreens tried to compensate.

“That’s a bubble approaching us at half of light speed.”

“Half light speed?” Loco said incredulously. “Nothing goes that fast in normal space.”

“Bubbles do. What you see is the blueshift as they come straight toward us. Every EM freq that hits them and reflects in our direction gets compressed. Fortunately there’s only a tiny bit—but even that tiny bit gets blueshifted to very bright levels.”

Suddenly, the brightness vanished and the viewports cleared. Outside, at a distance of about one hundred meters, floated a bubble perhaps fifteen meters across. It was completely reflective, like a mirror. Stars, the system’s bright blue sun, and the *Cassiel* herself could clearly be seen in its surface.

“And by the way,” Chiara said, “they stop that fast, too. They seem to have no inertia at all.”

“Wow. Inertialess drive. What’s it doing?”

“Looking at us. Checking us out.”

“But there’s no indication of a scan.”

“There never is... but believe me, Mechron knows. That’s why everything high-tech on this ship has been shut down.”

“Mechron doesn’t care if we have the equipment, just that we use it, right?”

“Fortunately, Mechron’s more rational than most species. It doesn’t freak out because we have something it doesn’t like—only if we use it. It

treats us like adults—and holds us accountable. Ruthlessly.”

“Adults, huh? That’s an interesting viewpoint.”

“That’s *my* viewpoint,” she said. “Not everybody agrees.”

Loco wasn’t sure he did either, but each such odd declaration helped him understand Chiara better. “So it’s like a machine cop—or an automated defense system. Act in the right way, you’re safe. Act in the wrong way, there’s no appeal—it blasts you.”

“Pretty much.”

“And you call that adult?”

Chiara shrugged.

Loco looked annoyed. “Seems more childish and immature, simpleminded. My way or the highway, no discussion.”

“Simple rules, consistently enforced. Sounds like one of the principles of leadership Straker’s always on about.”

“There’s more to it than that.”

“There always is. But for our survival, that’s all there is right now.”

“Got it.” Loco continued to watch the bubble with fascination and a certain level of visceral terror, thoroughly aware that this powerful, unknown, alien thing could destroy them before they could escape.

And then it vanished.

“Where’d it go?”

Chiara pointed at a display, which showed a streak of black. “It moved away—at half light speed. That’s the track *Cassiel*’s SAI can infer from its disruption of space dust and from radiation.”

“Why does Mechron let us use the SAI?”

“I guess it’s not advanced enough to bother it... or maybe because the SAI doesn’t *do* anything outside the ship, anything that affects anyone else. Visitors have been having discussions like this for thousands of years. There’s no point in trying to understand *why* it does what it does—only what the rules are.”

“I might swallow that answer, but don’t ever say that to Zaxby or Murdock—or any brainiac. They might suddenly run off and dedicate their whole life to figuring Mechron out.”

“Noted.” Chiara spoke into the intercom. “Stay on the tail gun, Raj. Just don’t fire at anything of Mechron origin.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“We’re heading in.” She slowly shoved forward the fusion engine throttles, next to the impeller controls—over which she’d taped a hard cover.

The cruise time into the system allowed Loco plenty of time to examine the planets—at least, as well as he could with the sloop’s crappy sensors. Oh, they were good enough when it came to identifying immediate threats, but poor compared to a military ship’s suite of opticals and fused EM detectors.

There were thirteen planets. That was normal enough. However, the resemblance of normalcy ended there.

First, each and every planet was a blue-green, life-bearing world—the most common kind, for the most common type of life: Earthlike, oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, supporting carbon-based living things. While other kinds of life were known—the radioactive Thorians, or the strange Crystals for example—most life bigger than microbes was of this type.

Next, the planets themselves occupied the same stellar orbit, like beads on a curved, invisible string. They whirled around the blazingly bright blue central star—far larger and hotter than most suns that shone above life-bearing worlds. Each planet had an axial tilt and a single large moon—more resemblances to Earth, and to a few other prominent blue-green homeworlds, the kind that had developed their own independent sentient life.

Only one planet showed signs of technology, though: Mechrono-7, the home of the Living. Toward that planet they set course.

Here and there, bubbles flew on their inscrutable tasks. Hundreds of them whizzed around. They also detected at least eleven non-Mechron ships, though all were so far away they couldn’t be positively identified yet.

“Mechron must have *built* this system,” Loco said as he scrolled through the data and fiddled with the sensors. “It’s completely unnatural.”

“Obviously. If nothing else, thirteen planets in the same orbit are so delicately balanced that they’d start shifting and wandering within a few years if not constantly adjusted.”

“Reminds me a little of Utopia, in a way.”

Chiara glanced sharply at him. “That’s true. Maybe they’re related. Or maybe advanced civilizations—or AIs—like to build impressive things.”

“Or maybe there used to be one old advanced galactic civilization that came before all of us—one that had many sections or parts, or subspecies,

or... ” Loco ground to a halt. “Just speculation, I guess, but this is stuff I never thought about before.”

“Yes, it sure makes you think... and realize how big and weird it all is.” Chiara locked the controls before reaching over to take his hand.

He held her hand gingerly, then more firmly. It seemed a delicate bridge, a peace offering that he didn’t want to disrupt.

They cruised in silence for some time before Chiara shook her hand free, unlocked the controls, and altered their course to insert into orbit around Mechrono-7. There were no orbital defenses, but there were several satellites and some kind of base on the inner, planet-facing surface of the moon. All seemed to be using basic radio waves—UHF and VHF mostly—for communication and telemetry.

And there was another ship in orbit.

An Arattak frigate, just like the ones which had attacked the Hercules.

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Chapter 9

Humbar system, aboard *Redwolf*.

“More precisely, the *Hercules* was sent to a place called Hell’s Reach, or Hellheim,” Zaxby said as he brought up a star map in the *Redwolf*’s holotank. “It’s an enormous nebula-like structure on the edge of the Middle Reach, toward the galactic center. If the Middle Reach is the Wild West, this Hellheim Nebula is the badlands. There are reported dangers there unique to known space—crazy stories, some seem to be true, some are almost certainly not.”

“Like what?” Steiner asked.

“Unstable proto-stars, for instance,” Zaxby rattled on. “Beings composed of energy and plasma. Gigantic spacegoing creatures, some sentient, some little more than simplistic eating machines. Lithoid creatures of similar ilk to the azoic Crystals. Gravitic and ionic storms. Pulsars. Quasars. Singularities. Stars that don’t conform to known types. It’s said that in some regions, the laws of physics are different.”

“Huh... Hellheim is a good name,” Steiner said. “In the Old Sachsen tongue that place was Hellia. Some would say Hella-Heim or Helheim. The underworld, the land of the dead, ruled by the goddess Hel.”

Straker lifted his eyebrows in surprise. “That’s the first time you’ve said more than five words that didn’t involve soldiering.”

“It is the mythology of my people. I watch many fantasy vids based on this mythology.”

“Sounds entertaining. Forward me copies, if you don’t mind.” Straker turned to Zaxby. “And you have data on Hell’s Reach?”

“We have little but rumors, unsubstantiated newsnet postings, and the lurid stories of the popular fiction industry. No doubt genuine hard data exists, but the Middle Reach is not known for its scientific inquiry—unless money can be made from it. Those who’ve been to Hellheim apparently keep the information for themselves, hoping to profit.”

“So we’re going in blind?”

“As usual,” Zaxby answered, “you’re exercising your penchant for hyperbole. We’re far from blind. I’d like to think we’re going in with minds and eyes open.”

“But without much intel.” Straker flexed his right hand, a nervous tic since he’d regenerated it less than a year ago.

Mara said, “How about asking our friends, the Humbar? Or the Thorians?”

“The Thorians don’t talk much.”

“Yet they showed up to help.”

“You’re right. Turn on our transponder. Hail them and let’s see what they say.”

Mara set course for the former battle zone, now easily visible and identifiable to both friendly contingents. “I’ve got a Fleet Bull Ternus on the comlink, asking to speak with you, Derek.”

“Put him on.”

The audio buzzed, and then: “Herd Bull Straker?”

“I’m here, ah, Fleet Bull Ternus.”

“I’m the senior commander of military forces at Humbar-5. Thank you for your intervention efforts. They were timely and of great respect to our defenders.”

“You’re welcome. We value our Humbar friends, and hope for closer ties in the future.”

“Thank you for your diplomacy, but I am only a humble, grateful warrior. I would like to invite you to a meeting.”

“Thanks very much, but we’ll have to decline. We have pressing matters, especially the recovery of some of our people the Arattak kidnapped.”

“Perhaps you will reconsider when I tell you it is the Thorians who request it.”

Straker turned to see Zaxby waving several tentacles for attention. “One moment, Fleet Bull. Mute comlink.” He signaled Zaxby to speak.

“The Thorians seldom meet with anyone, Derek Straker. This could be a unique opportunity to acquire information.”

He forced himself to think it over. Every fiber of his being screamed to go straight after Carla and the others, but heading for Hell’s Reach without enough intel was asking for disaster. Besides, it would only be a few hours until the Breaker fleet arrived. The *Redwolf* was fast and flexible, but there was nothing like real warships for power and security.

“All right. We might as well wait until Gray shows up. Gather intel, make a plan. Unmute the comlink. Fleet Bull Ternus, we accept your

invitation.”

“We are pleased. Details will follow via data burst. Ternus out.”

Once he’d programmed in the flight plan, Zaxby stood. “I have work to do.”

“Work?”

“I must modify my water suit for increased radiation shielding. I suggest you humans optimize spacesuits, as well as prepare an assortment of equipment for radiation detection and mitigation.”

“I’ll get working on that, Derek,” Mara said.

“Won’t the Bug repair any radiation damage?” Straker asked.

“Sure, eventually. How long do you want to be blinded and vomiting for?”

“Point taken.” Straker took the pilot’s seat and let the SAI autopilot the yacht into orbit around H-5. Soon, as instructed, they landed inside an underground hangar on one of the gas giant’s many moons. Mara synchronized translator modules to standard comlinks and pinned the speakers to the humans’ chests. Straker ordered Steiner to stay aboard.

When they walked down the disembarkation ramp, Straker saw hundreds of uniformed Humbar drawn up in ranks. They saluted the Breakers, left hands held upward, all four fingers splayed. Straker returned the salute in the traditional human manner.

At the bottom of the ramp waited an imposing, long-horned male in a fancy uniform—Fleet Bull Ternus, of course. He and Straker exchanged salutes again, and then an awkward left-handed handshake. The Humbar’s right hand looked to have been recently amputated at the elbow, with a medical machine-sleeve covering the stump—a battle injury, no doubt. Straker could sympathize.

“Thank you for the honors, Fleet Bull, but I’m sure your people have a lot to do. We’re fine with less formality, if you are.”

“That is courteous of you.” He turned to bellow something unintelligible, and the assembly dissolved.

“I see you saw some personal action.” Straker gestured at the missing arm.

Ternus touched it with his opposite hand. “Actually, this is something else. Come this way.” He began to walk. Four other bulls followed at a discreet distance—security? Aides? Herd instinct?

“I mean no insult, Fleet Bull,” Mara said as they followed Ternus across the hangar, “but have all precautions been taken for the meeting with the Thorians? Humans are even more susceptible to radiation than Humbar.”

“Only one Thorian. He will remain inside his own suit. And yes, my technicians have researched your physiology and made sure the radiation levels are safe—for a short time.”

“Good. I have my own scanners and medical items here, just in case.” She hefted the utility bag she carried.

“Of course.”

The Thorian waited inside the meeting room, across a large, heavy table. It—Thorians had no sex or gender—stood shoulder-high, with four blocky legs, four stubby arms, and a squarish head, with no apparent front or back—just four sides.

It wore a sealed, silvered suit. Straker was reminded of ancient science-fiction showvids where every surface and fabric was shiny and metallic. In fact, the multiple metal coatings were there to keep the radiation in, not out.

Mara consulted a handheld detector and nodded. “We’re good for an hour or two at this rate.”

To a Thorian, as Zaxby had briefed them, much of the universe was cold and sterile. Only high-radiation environments felt warm and welcoming. Since they derived all their sustenance from radiation and radiating materials, for a Thorian, having no radiation was as if a human had no heat, food or water. Thus, they carried radiation sources with them, inside their suits and ships.

The translated, artificial voice that emanated from the suit was as metallic as the suit coatings, making the Thorian seem more like a robot than a living creature. “I am here.” That’s all it said.

“We are here,” Zaxby replied.

“My fission-mate speaks well of you.”

Straker swiveled his head to Zaxby and Mara. “Who’s he talking about?”

“I’m not sure,” Mara said.

Zaxby said, “A fission-mate is the other person created when a Thorian divides into two beings. It’s their method of reproduction. There is no closer relationship in Thorian society.”

“Like a sibling, a parent and a child, all in one,” Mara added. “Or a twin.”

“Then who’s he talking about?”

“I can venture a guess.” said Zaxby. “Do you recall we rescued a lone Thorian from the Korveni crimorg?”

Mara snapped her fingers. “Right! It asked to be dropped off at Crossroads with some of the other rescued people.”

Straker addressed the Thorian. “I’m glad your fission-mate spoke well of us. What can we do for you?”

“Nothing at present. For the future, we propose an alliance. Details are here.” The Thorian extended a limb and placed a data module on the table.

Mara scanned it, and then put on a glove to pick it up and place it in a container. “I’ll decontaminate this and download it later.”

Straker asked, “Does this proposed alliance include the Humbar?”

“It does. Also, others.”

He turned to Herd Bull Ternus. “What do you think about this proposal?”

“My government has already agreed in principle. This attack has demonstrated our vulnerability to the Axis of Predators.”

“Axis of Predators?”

“According to reports, the Arattak, the Korven, the Dicon, the Crocs and the Vulps have banded together to prey on the vulnerable. Others may join them, if they demonstrate success.”

“I presume that on-the-nose alliance name means they’re all predator species, looking to increase their power at the expense of peaceable people like the Humbar.”

“So it appears,” Ternus said. “Given the attack we just suffered, we are willing to make alliances, even with meat-eating omnivores such as yourselves—no offense.”

“None taken.” Straker checked his people for objections, and then nodded to the Thorian. “We agree in principle.”

“Good. We must fuse, you and I.” The Thorian walked sideways to the end of the table, and without turning, shifted direction to approach Straker.

“Hold on,” Straker said, lifting a hand and backing up.

The Thorian stopped.

Mara held up her detector. “Rads just tripled. Time, shielding and distance, Derek. Its shielding is fixed, so decreasing our distance just decreased the time we can stay here. We have maybe twenty minutes now—or we can put on our suits.”

“Okay, twenty minutes. Let me talk to our new friend here.” Straker turned to the Thorian. “I’m Derek Straker. What should we call you?”

“Emissary.”

“No, I mean, you individually.”

It seemed to ponder. “Roentgen.”

“Cute,” Mara said. “A radiation joke. At least now we know Thorians have a sense of humor.”

“Either that, or they’re utterly literal-minded,” Straker replied.

The Thorian spoke again. “We must fuse, you and I, Derek Straker.”

“Uh... fuse? That sounds dangerous.”

“You will survive.”

“I’d be happy to fuse with you, Roentgen,” Zaxby said eagerly.

“No. It must be Derek Straker.”

“Why?” Straker asked.

“Because he is the Liberator.”

“The role that will not die.” Straker looked at Mara. “What’s fusing involve?”

“It looks like a handshake, no gloves, but for Thorians, it’s like... a mind-meld. It’s very intimate. Particles are exchanged.”

He forced himself to think past his immediate revulsion and consider it. “So we’ll be... brainlinked, in a way?”

“According to the reports, it will be less clear, more like shared dreaming or hallucinations.”

“And why is this necessary?” Straker asked.

“It’s their way of bonding,” Zaxby explained, “it’s how they seal an important agreement. The process serves to make sure they can fully trust each other.”

“It is a great honor, Liberator Derek Straker,” Roentgen said. “We seldom fuse with aliens, and only at the direst need. I must confirm your worthiness to merit our trust.”

Straker’s eyes wandered to Ternus and his missing arm. Realization hit him. So, the Humbar had already made the deal, and the Fleet Bull had paid the price. But he’d survived, and seemed fine, except for the limb, which could be regenerated.

Ternus met his gaze and nodded gravely.

Could Straker do any less?

But...

He backed away to pace a few steps along the far wall, waving his sister over and speaking in a low voice. “Mara... will this guy get the location of our base from my mind?”

“I can’t rule it out,” she said.

“And they won’t trust us without this fusing?”

“That’s what he says.”

“And I’ll lose my hand again, I guess. Getting to be a habit. What’ll it do to my body?”

“Nothing good. Your organs will be flooded with radiation and isotopic particles. The only reason I’m not playing the doctor card and forbidding this is we have the rejuvenation tank. If we keep it short, do some preparation, and get you into the tank immediately after, you should be fine... physically. We can even rebuild your hand in a couple of hours. Mentally—well, most aliens who fuse with Thorians *don’t* go insane.” Mara made a sour face. “Most of them...”

“I know it’s risky, Mara, but this is important—not just for nonaggressive people like the Humbar and the Thorians, but for the Breakers too. We’re tough, but realistically, we’re only one battle away from disaster. We need allies—for deterrence, and for help if we call. So... I’m going to do this.”

Mara pursed her lips in resignation. “Yeah. Figured you would. I know you, and I know when you get that look on your face there’s no point in trying to talk you out of it. Let’s get you ready.”

The fusing took place in the infirmary, at Mara’s insistence. Straker wore a spacesuit with one glove removed, and at his own insistence he was strapped to a tilted medical table, double-restrained. Zaxby and Steiner stood by in suits with stunners as well, just in case the process sent him berserk.

Roentgen squatted on a stool, their usual method of sitting, as Thorians had no backs or fronts. It removed one of its gloves, revealing a gray-brown, symmetrical, four-fingered hand like a mechanical gripper. Mara’s radiation detectors beeped as their readings spiked.

Straker extended his right arm. He’d thought about using the left, as he was right-handed, but he’d already regenerated his right hand, and his left was the one he’d been born with. He felt oddly reluctant to give that one up.

The Thorian grasped his hand, and he felt it begin to itch. He resisted his urge to pull away, and let the process happen.

Soon, images filled his mind—a slow, unaware process like falling asleep. He found himself color-blind, yet able to see in so many shades of gray that it didn't matter. He also was able to peer through the surfaces of many things—like the old “X-Ray Vision” of superhero tales. Some objects were transparent, and some were solid and opaque. This kind of sight added a tremendous complexity to the universe.

He also felt his hand grow cold, and then numb, as if it were in a bucket of ice water. Straker realized the process was uncomfortable for Roentgen as well. Though the Thorian wouldn't lose the limb, the human cells and fluids it was taking in were slow poison.

His mind expanded, and for the time he was fused he understood Thorians in a new way—their uniqueness among those to whom radiation was a danger, not a comfort; their sense of isolation as a society and as individuals; their joy at their infrequent fusing; their complex taboos surrounding the process.

Straker also sensed that Roentgen, while an unusually strong and stable mind, was on the edge of madness from fusing with not one, but two alien species today, his senses overwhelmed with new kinds of input. Thorians had only three senses—radiation-vision, touch, and smell-taste. Dividing smell and taste, and adding hearing, was like allowing a blind-and-deaf man to see and hear for the first time, all at once.

He tried to send thoughts of calm and strength, and received the same in return. The longer he stayed fused, the more he respected these strange beings. Despite their bizarre, bleak situation, they were positive and cheerful, with a subtle culture filled with their version of literature and discourse. He felt the pull of a potentially deep friendship and connection, something rare enough in his own life to make him ache with wanting to stay and explore the universe from the Thorian perspective.

There was more, much more, but it faded like a dream as he was forced upward toward the surface of his consciousness. He resisted, but awoke to find himself sputtering with cold water running down his face.

“Sorry about that,” Mara said as she put down a bucket, but she didn't sound sorry at all. “You don't seem to want to let go, and you've suffered enough damage for one day.”

“What?” Straker stared at his right arm, still grasping Roentgen's in a death-grip. His hand was red and puffy, as if burned. There was pain around

his wrist, but everything past that was utterly numb. He tried to let go, but couldn't move it. "I can't..."

Mara used her gloved hands to break the grip of Straker's dead fingers, and Roentgen withdrew his own limb into his suit like a turtle's head, cradling it. "Come on, brother, out of the suit and into the tank with you."

With the fading of the connection, Straker realized he had a fever. Sweat broke out on his face. He wanted to vomit, violently, and he shook with chills. Zaxby oozed out of his own extra outer suit, now that the Thorian was fully inside his own again, and used his many tentacles to help remove Straker's protective coverings. He lifted Straker like a baby and placed him in the regeneration tank.

Everything hurt—his joints, his skin, his nerves—everything except his dead hand.

"Good night, Derek," Mara said with a touch of ironic affection as she closed the crystalline canopy. "See you in a few hours."

He welcomed the merciful dark.

* * *

When he awoke, Straker felt clearheaded, but thirsty. As with every time he'd woken up in a medical tank of any sort, he had to piss. Mara was already lifting the canopy as the urge hit him. He sat up and swung his feet out onto the deck.

Suddenly he looked at his right hand. Except for being hairless and pink again, it was the same as before. "That's amazing."

"It's amazing tech. Tricky, but powerful... and dangerous."

"I can see why you brainiacs are keeping quiet about it."

Mara nodded. "We could get a ton of money for it, but the underlying subquantum principles are at least a thousand years ahead of current tech levels—and like most discoveries, there's no telling what evil might come of it before society adjusts. So yeah, we're going slow. Regrowing a limb quickly is just a start. Don't forget your golem. Crimorgs making force-grown zombie clones in months is bad enough. Do we really want them to get ahold of a tech to create perfect, short-lived copies of people in days or hours?"

"Obviously not. We're on the same page. Thanks, sis." He hopped down, grabbed his pants and headed for his quarters.

Showered and changed, he walked onto the bridge to see the ship was in space again, in high orbit around H-5. The chrono said five hours had passed. "Gray ought to be here soon," he said.

Zaxby gestured at the holotank. "She is, with the whole fleet, minus only a few skimmers and *Independence*. If I had to venture a guess, I'd say she's vexed that she had no battle to fight, and concerned that Utopia is left largely undefended."

"Indy can put up one hell of a fight if it comes to that," Straker replied. "Besides, it's Utopia's secrecy that protects it."

"Speaking of such secrecy..."

"I don't think Roentgen got the coordinates from my mind, if that's what you're asking. The visions we shared weren't so specific, and I don't remember any numbers or math. It probably knows we have a secret base, maybe that it's a Dyson-cylinder out in deep space somewhere, but even if so... I trust the guy. He's good people. He wouldn't screw us."

"I hope you made a similar impression." Zaxby adjusted the holotank view to show a star map that extended all the way to Hellheim. "What shall we do next, General?"

"Not sure." Straker pondered as he began to pace. The fusing had diverted his thinking, muddled the waters, and he needed time to get his head on straight again. "Let's move toward the fleet. By the time we get there, I'll know."

"Aye aye, sir." Zaxby set *Redwolf* on course for Gray's task force.

Chapter 10

Loco aboard *Cassiel*, Mechrono system.

“Bastards,” Loco growled as he glared at the displays showing an Arattak ship in orbit above Mechrono-7, their destination. “Wish we could...”

“What?” Chiara threw up her hands. “This isn’t a warship, Loco. Besides, Mechron usually destroys any ship in space who makes aggressive moves.”

“Usually? What are the rules?”

“Boarding doesn’t seem to trigger the response, or weapons lower than a certain power and tech level.”

“Lower than what?”

“In this case, about twenty-five millimeter... which is one reason I put an old twenty-millimeter high-velocity cannon in our tail, and one in the nose.”

Loco turned to stare. “Wait... you had only a few hours to get this ship ready to launch, and you customized the ship? How is that possible?”

Chiara dropped her eyes. “The weapons are modular. Swap-in, swap-out. Only takes half an hour.”

“But that means... you’ve been here before.”

“I might have.”

Loco rolled his eyes.

“Okay, I’ve been here before. I’ve been lots of different places. So?”

“So why the hell didn’t you mention it? Oh, I remember—you’re used to working alone. And the captain doesn’t need to inform the crew of what’s going on, even if it gets them killed, right?”

“You are correct, Crewman Paloco. Why don’t you unlock the weapons panel and check it out? Might make you feel better.” She said this last in a vicious tone.

He bit his tongue to keep the peace.

For now.

The Arattak ship ignored them, and Chiara piloted *Cassiel* in a wide arc away from it anyway, ending up in a counter-orbit with the planet between them.

“What now?” Loco asked.

“Now we land and talk to the Living.”

“We can’t talk to them from up here?”

“They don’t like dealing with Halfers over comlink. We’ll only get what we need face to face.”

“These plant freaks have faces?”

“Sort of. You’ll see.”

Chiara slowed the ship and descended toward the Living’s largest grouping, what might be called a city, in middle of the largest of three continents, on the equator. *Cassiel* extended stubby wings to turn her descent into flight, and soon landed on a grassy runway as smooth and hard as a golf green.

There were a few hangars, looking aged and neglected. Ten or twelve old-fashioned aeroplanes with jets or even propellers, and some drones and aircars, were scattered around haphazardly. There was no control tower or obvious airfield operations building or terminal. Off to the side, dilapidated ground vehicles were parked around an odd jumbled structure of roofless walls.

“Raj, you and Bel stay here,” Chiara said when they’d taxied to a halt well away from the only other aerospace vessel there, an Arattak shuttle. “Keep a close eye on the spiders. Brock, gear up. You’re coming with us.”

The grass was soft and springy underfoot and the weather warm and humid as the three strode across the greensward toward the wall-jumble. This turned out to be the port of entry, such as it was. There, Loco got his first look at the Living.

They resembled small trees, with smooth red-brown bark and oval-leaved crowns. They stood three to four meters high and had multiple legs, or roots, which allowed them to move. They walked slowly by animal standards, but very fast for a plant, lifting spidery roots, reaching and stepping into the next spot, and stabbing into the soil in turn. Of the dozen he could see, though, only one or two was ever in motion at a time. It appeared they preferred to remain rooted in one spot, drinking up the sun and the moisture in the soil.

Chiara approached one standing behind a semicircular table on which stood a sign in several languages, including Earthan, that read *Customs*. Sitting in the lowest crotch of its branches was a sleepy-eyed creature resembling a koala bear, or a fat raccoon. Beneath the animal, on the tree’s bark, Loco saw a distinctive diamond-shaped patch of glassy material.

Below that was a ring of tiny holes extending around the circumference of the tree.

“We’re checking in,” Chiara said without preamble. She dropped an optical disk into a slot on an ancient-looking computer on the table.

Faint whistles like wind proceeded from the holes in the tree. “Your presence and your account balance have been recorded,” the bear said in high-pitched Earthan. “You know our laws?”

“We do.”

“Then go in peace.”

“I need information first,” Chiara said. “Who is the current Speaker to Halfers?”

“Silaborne. You will find her in the Plaza of Halfers.”

“Of course. Thank you.”

“You are welcome.”

As they stepped away, Loco puzzled through the exchange he’d just witnessed. “That bear was some kind of translator?”

“Yeah. The trees talk with each other using low-frequency bio-radio. They communicate with Halfers using those whistles. Most trees have a Halfer to speak for them.”

“You don’t have a translator working for you.”

“That bear-like creature wouldn’t work for me; their kind hate conflict... and my life has never been what you’d call peaceful.” Chiara led them toward the parking lot. “Aircar or ground?”

“Ground,” Loco replied. “Can’t see much detail from an aircar.”

“Good choice,” she said as she looked over the rattletraps parked there. “They also don’t crash as hard when they fail. Hey, you!” This last she directed at a short rat-man very much like the one who’d tried to pickpocket Loco at the Rainbow Contractor market.

“Yes, mistress,” the creature said, delicately clawed fingers held curled downward in front of him. “I am the vehicle rental agent.” He clutched at a credential dangling from his neck.

“We’ll take... that one, for one day.” Chiara pointed at one of the ground vehicles, an open four-seater buggy with a small cargo bed in back.

“Forty credits with insurance.”

“We don’t need the insurance.”

The rat-man wrung his hands. “Oh, mistress, you certainly do. Without insurance, you are liable for—”

“We don’t need the fucking insurance,” Chiara snarled, leaning to loom over the smaller biped. “Don’t make me kick you in the nuts.”

The rat-man crossed his legs, trying to shield his prominent, white-furred testicles, and backed away. “Of course. Thirty credits. Plus tax.”

“There is no added tax here.”

“Tax included, I meant, of course, of course.”

Chiara held out the credit disk.

The agent processed the transaction. “The keys are in it. You are also liable for fuel used.”

“It’s solar-electric, you cheating piece of shit. Don’t try to con me.”

The rat-man merely smiled. “A pleasure doing business with you, mistress...”

“I’m Captain Chiara Jilani. Tell your friends to keep their sticky paws off me and mine while we’re here, or you’ll be sorry.” She paused and cocked an eye. “On the other hand... I’m looking for some human Contractors brought here within the last week, possibly by the spider ship in orbit. If you can get me details—pictures, locations, anything at all—I’ll pay well.”

“I’ll see what I can do, Captain. I’m Fiss, if you need to ask after me.”

“All right, Fiss. Stay low.”

Fiss bobbed his head. “Stay low, Captain.”

Chiara hopped into the buggy and checked its simple systems. Loco took shotgun and Brock climbed into the cargo bed, bracing himself facing backward, slugthrower at the ready.

They drove through the city and it was one of the oddest cities Loco had ever seen—not that he’d see many alien cities. The whole place looked more like a poorly planned and abandoned park. Rampant greenery was interspersed with roofless buildings. Some could hardly be called buildings at all. Sometimes single walls stood at angles, with Living trees standing near them surrounded by furniture of various sorts—tables, chairs for the Halfers, consoles and screens, as if a distracted child had half-disassembled a diorama and forgotten to put it back together.

“What do they do when it rains?” Loco asked as Chiara drove slowly through the meandering swards that passed for streets.

“Throw tarps over anything that can’t stand up to a soaking. Some of the buildings have clear plastic roofs, you might notice, but usually the Living want everything open to the sky. Halfers must learn to adapt here.

There are a few Halfer ghettos, with normal buildings. Lots of rats live there.”

Chiara pulled over and parked in a spot no different from any other in this maze of a city, as far as Loco could see. Maybe there were more non-plant sentient Halfers around—aliens, Loco would’ve called them in any other setting. She tossed Brock the keys. “Watch the buggy.” Then she strode confidently in among the angled walls, clear roofs and freestanding furniture.

“What do they do at night?” Loco asked as they walked.

“What do trees usually do at night? They stand in place.”

“Do they sleep?”

“Not really. Their energy level is lower, and they don’t usually move much. Some turn on artificial lights and stay awake for long stretches.” She walked up to a more substantial set of three walls, nearly a true building with its clear crystal roof over half of it. On one outer wall was a sign in several scripts—none of them Earthan. Chiara ran her fingers over one, puzzling out the signs. “I think this is it.”

Inside—loosely speaking—there were several Living with bear-looking guys in their lower branches, each standing behind a semicircular desk with a jumble of office machinery on it, all of a tech level that most would call obsolete five hundred years ago. No holos, no comlinks, and the few firearms in evidence were cordite-powered slugthrowers—what used to simply be called guns, before that term grew to include blasters, hand-lasers and other modern weapons.

In front of each desk was a short line of Halfers of various sorts. There were rat-people and humanoids of many shapes, sizes and colors, one insectoid of an unfamiliar type, and two Arattak standing together. Their heads rotated to briefly examine the newcomers, and then they turned away. Four big, heavily armored guards like two-hundred-kilo dinosaurs stood watching, large, short-barreled carbines in their hands.

Behind this whole assemblage, in the corner, stood a larger Living tree, with several humanoids at more desks, apparently serving it.

“That’s the boss, I bet,” Loco said.

“Right. Silaborne. Sort of an ambassador or foreign minister.” She led them to the shortest line in front of one of the outer desks, well away from the Arattak.

When they reached the front, the bear said, “State your inquiry.”

“We’re looking for the location of a group of ten to twenty humans—our own specific species—brought to this planet within the last week, probably as Contractors.”

“Search depth?”

“Maximum. And confidential.”

“That will be one hundred forty credits.”

“Agreed.” Chiara dropped her disk in the reader.

“That’s a lot just for a search,” Loco muttered.

“Part of the payoff is for confidentiality,” she replied. “Out here, a thing is worth what you can sell it for and what someone will pay. Remember that.”

A printer spat out a dozen sheets of glossy hardcopy—considering the climate, probably waterproof, Loco thought. The Living extended delicate branches, stapled the sheets into three separate sets, and passed them to Chiara, along with her credit disk. “Thank you for your commerce. Next!” the bear said.

“Come on,” Chiara said, stuffing the sheaf into her jacket. “We’re being watched.”

Loco didn’t see anything—or rather, he saw too much. There was no way to pick out surveillance in this busy, unfamiliar urban park. They walked quickly to the buggy and hopped in. Chiara drove back to ship.

Inside, in the cabin, she folded away the bed and folded out a table and chairs for four. Raj stood while the three humans and Brock sat.

Chiara spread out the three sets of hardcopy and handed one to Loco, one to Brock. “Three possible locations. Look these over and tell me whether you think it’s our people.”

Loco examined his. Map graphics showed where the group was—an island up north. The rest of the printout showed data on the personnel—sex, size, apparent age, names provided if any, declared commercial value and many other statistics. “How many women were aboard the *Hercules* again?” he asked.

“Twelve men, six women.”

“This group has fifteen, with twelve being women.”

“Mine is eleven men,” Brock said.

“And mine is ten women.” Chiara glanced around. “Best guess? Most likely?”

“Brock’s group,” Loco said immediately. “If the Arattak separated them by gender, his might be the eleven Breaker men, because one got killed in the attack. With the other two groups, our women would have to be consolidated with other Contractors and sold here—possible, but less sure.”

“I agree.”

Brock nodded, and so did Belinda.

“Any recognizable names?” Brock asked.

Chiara grabbed a handtab and read off the *Hercules*’ manifest. None of the names matched anyone’s groups, but many of those listed didn’t have names, just alphanumeric designations or descriptions like “Laborer D” or “Mechanic 46.”

“Gimme that,” she said, and took Brock’s packet into the cockpit. She used the ship’s databases to pull up the location of that group, and information on the area. “Hmm.”

“What?”

“Just a sec.” She booted up the datalink protocols and worked her way through them, muttering and cursing under her breath. “What a shitty open network. And look at this—we’re getting attacked by low-level malware already.”

“Can you handle it?”

She snorted in contempt. “*Cassiel*’s SAI could probably take over their whole network by herself... if we wanted to risk Mechron vaporizing us for using high tech. No worries on the defensive end, but it’s gonna take me some time to find what we need using software that won’t get us killed. Either that or we go back to the Speaker to Halfers.”

“Let’s worry about what-ifs when we find them.”

“Right. So shut up and let me find them.” Chiara worked her way through the network for over an hour.

During that time, Loco, Raj and Brock stepped out and walked around the ship. It was pleasant outside, and always interesting to look over an alien world—to smell the unfamiliar smells, to examine the subtle differences of a new place. They talked weapons, compared their sidearms and blades, discussed the relative merits of blasters versus more precise guns.

Loco found himself liking the badgers. They were down-to-earth, professional operators. They were completely unfamiliar with powered armor—not even battlesuits, much less mechsuits—but still, they were

thoroughly competent security specialists. They pointed out the creatures watching the spaceport and its activity—one Arattak and two rats for sure, along with the native trees and their bears.

When Chiara called them back in, they crowded into the cockpit, the only place with multiple displays. These showed diagrams and blurry pictures of some kind of facility, along with a few paragraphs of data. “Okay, good news, bad news. The good news is, I found this likely group here on the main continent. The bad news is, they’re being used by Arattak-controlled rhodium miners in a high mountain range to the south, outside of the Living’s control.” She pointed at a map that pinpointed the location.

“I thought this was the Living’s planet?” Loco said.

“Mechron doesn’t care whose it is. The Living claim it, but they don’t thrive above one thousand meters in altitude, so they don’t go up there much. Their security forces are made up of Dreet—the big saurians—who don’t like the cold, so they only go up into the mountains in the summer, and only if there’s a good reason. It’s winter right now, and as long as the mining doesn’t really affect the Living, they don’t worry too much about their sovereignty being violated.”

“So how do we get our people back?”

“We’ll buy them.”

“What? Breakers don’t pay ransom.”

“They’re Contractors, Loco. We’ll buy their Contracts. That’s the simplest way.”

Loco folded his arms. “The Arattak are our enemies. They pirated one of our ships. Even if they’d sell our people back to us, we’re not going to let them profit from their crimes. We’ll rescue them, and stomp on anyone who gets in our way.”

Chiara contemplated a moment. “Okay. Brock, you or Raj ever been to this planet?”

“No, Captain.”

“Belinda?”

“No, Captain,” she replied.

“So we have no idea where to get extra muscle,” Chiara said.

“How about asking your rat buddies?” Loco said.

“They don’t fight unless they’re cornered. Anyone they recommended, I wouldn’t trust. Which limits us to us four.”

“Five,” Belinda said.

“You’d be useless in a fight,” Chiara replied.

“Who said anything about fighting?” She unzipped her tunic, exposing smooth curves. “I can infiltrate. I’ll fake selling my Contract to them if I have to.”

“Arattak can’t be seduced by human women,” Chiara said. “And they won’t see you as a strong laborer.”

Belinda closed her tunic in disappointment. “But you said there are Arattak-controlled miners... so are the ordinary miners humanoid?”

Chiara’s eyes unfocused, she was thinking hard. “I don’t have that information, but they might be.”

Bel grinned smugly. “If they’re mammals, I can distract them with mammaries.” She cracked open her tunic again, and Loco couldn’t help taking a second glance.

“What about transport?” Brock asked, eyeing Belinda’s cleavage speculatively. “Even if we neutralize any defenses and get them free, this ship can’t carry eleven more people.”

“Yes she can, for a short time, if we clear the cabins and don’t go exo-atmo. We can fly right back here in under two hours.”

Loco looked skeptical. “Then how do we get them off-world?”

Chiara glared back. “Let’s burn that bridge when we come to it. At least they’ll be free.”

Loco sighed. “All right.”

“Okay, then. Let’s hammer out a plan.”

Chapter 11

Humbar System, bridge of the SBS *Redwolf*.

“Did we already make nice with the Thorians and the Humbar while I was out?” Straker asked Zaxby as he paced, working his new hand, trying to get used to it all over again. “Do the usual thanking and diplomatic backslapping?”

“Given that Thorians have no backs, rather like we Ruxins, that would be difficult.”

“Huh—that’s right. Both of your species are symmetrical.”

“It is one of a few standard biological plans that the Creator seems to like propagating through the galaxy.”

“Creator? I didn’t know you were religious, Zaxby.”

“I’m not. As I see no direct evidence for a Creator, I was indulging in human cultural metaphor. Even so, it does seem to be a time when the pendulum of religion is on the upswing. Perhaps you should get ahead of the trend, Derek Straker, and start your own religion. You’re a demigod already to many... *Liberator*. Remember the Derekites on Terra Nova?”

Straker snorted derisively.

Mara sat, checked her board, and swung around in the seat to put her feet up on the edge of the console. “Roentgen says his quarters are adequate.”

“What do you mean, Roentgen’s quarters?” Straker asked, turning to face her. “He’s aboard?”

“Yeah, he’s coming along.”

“Says who?”

Mara planted her feet on the deck and stood again, hands on hips. “Says me. You wanna fight about it, big brother?”

“No, but some consultation would be nice, considering I *am* in charge. Supposedly.”

Mara strode forward to confront him, her natural presence making her seem much taller than she was. “You were unconscious. Zaxby hasn’t been formally reinstated in the chain of command. I’m the Surgeon General of the Breakers, with Colonel-equivalent rank. I had to make a decision. I made it. You can countermand it, drop him off and have his people pick him

up, but you'll have to explain that to your new best friend. He seems to like you—gods and monsters know why.”

Straker found himself gazing at his new hand. “This is why. Okay, if he wants to come along, and you can handle the radiation issues...”

“We'll be fine. And frankly, considering what we know about Hell's Reach, he's probably going to be really useful. He can survive without a suit in environments that would kill us.”

“Good point.”

Zaxby interrupted them. “Liberator? Would you like to comlink Commodore Gray?”

“No, I'll wait until I see her in person aboard the *Trollheim*. What's with these local names? *Trollheim*, Hellheim?”

“Simply Old Norse and Old Germanic linguistic derivations. Heim in this case means ‘home’ or ‘home of.’”

“Right. But no, tell Gray I'm not ready after my... ordeal. Which is not untrue. I need to do some thinking.”

By the time *Redwolf* landed on the *Trollheim*'s flight deck, Straker had a tentative plan in mind—or at least, a course of action.

The ever-formal Commodore Ellen Gray piped him aboard with full flagship ceremony. Normally he found the production pointless though he knew it was good for the troops—making them feel honored even as they rendered the honors.

Today it felt good—like he'd earned it, and maybe he had since today he'd fought a battle, made an alliance, and suffered for the Breakers and for the very cause of freedom in the galaxy.

Because freedom was never free. In fact, its price was often high, and unappreciated by those who never had to pay. The phrases sounded pompous in his own mind, but they were true.

He declined the urge to make a speech, though. That would come later, during the inevitable sidespace downtime, shortly before they arrived and entered Hell—Hell's Reach, anyway.

“Assemble the staff for a meeting in one hour, if you please, Commodore,” Straker said as they walked toward the dreadnought's flag quarters. “In the meantime, begin preparations to take *Trollheim* to the Hellheim nebula. How many skimmers can she carry internally?”

“Ops-ready, rather than in cargo?” Gray asked.

“Yes.”

“Four, max.”

“Including *Redwolf*?” Straker asked.

Gray thought for a moment. “Three, then, without causing major flight-deck issues. She’s not a carrier.”

“Fine. Bring three skimmers—consult Zaxby on which ones—and *Redwolf*. Load her up with everything we might need—extra supplies, spare parts and so on.”

“Speaking of extra supplies, we brought a mechsuit squad and a company of battlesuiters. Plus your own suit, of course.”

“Good thinking. Gray, you’ll take the rest of the fleet home. You okay with that?”

“Of course. I understand the situation.”

“Who’s your flag captain?”

“Mercedes Salishan.”

“‘No Mercy’ Mercy Salishan? She ran the weapons testbed ship for the anti-Crystal weapons, right? The *Nano-rimo*...”

“The *Nanaimo*. Too bad we don’t have her ship, but we got her. She’s the best ship-driver I have.” Gray lifted an eyebrow. “Unless you want Zholin.”

Straker jerked in surprise. “Our Zholin? Pang Zholin? I thought we’d lost him.”

“He showed up at Crossroads recently and waited for one of our trading runs. He arrived just after you left. Escaped and defected.”

“Well, that is good news. Though... has he been vetted for...?”

“Vetted? We haven’t done any deep testing... I suppose he could be a humanopt fake, or turned by Steel’s people. We could do more—DNA with subquantum variance expression, distinguishing marks, dentals, fingerprints, memories.”

Straker chewed his cheek for a moment. “Zholin stays with you. Keep an eye on him. Give him responsibility and freedom. That’s the best way to test someone. Assign a Ruxin neuter counterintelligence specialist to monitor everything he does and look for anything out of the ordinary. I’m sorry you’ll miss the action, but you’re the only officer I’d trust with defending Utopia.”

“Indy could do it without me.”

“Maybe... but Indy has the heart of a civilian, not a military officer. At the end of the day, I’m not sure she’d give her last full measure of devotion,

or make the hard decisions like an organic. That's what I need most, right now. You're in command of the fleet... and you're an admiral as of this moment."

"An admiral?" she asked in surprise.

"You've earned it. That also makes it clear you're ahead of Zaxby in the chain of command, just in case. It's me, Engels, Loco, then you."

"Ah, sir... General Paloco departed shortly after you did, leaving me in command."

"Really?" Straker asked.

"Yes. Apparently he abdicated his membership in the Breakers, as far as Conglomerate law is concerned. He did this all through Indy, without consulting me, before he left with Mayor Jilani aboard her ship."

"That sneaky little bastard."

"Indy said they'd be searching for our people from the criminal underworld end of things. It's highly irregular."

"But not a bad idea. Okay, I guess that means the Breakers—and all the civilians—are in your capable hands, Ellen."

Admiral Gray took a deep, pleased breath as they stopped in front of a door. "Thank you, sir. You can count on me. Here's your quarters. See you in an hour in the main conference room."

After Steiner dropped off Straker's bags, Straker showered, changed and ate before the meeting. His quarters were far less luxurious and ostentatious than those aboard the yacht, but they suited him much better. They had an integrated office, with the dings and marks of other occupants throughout the years, adding to the indefinable, familiar sense of duty aboard a full-fledged warship instead of an armed luxury yacht.

The meeting was routine, with quick summaries of the recent events, the new alliances, and Straker's intended courses of action. The review reminded him that there were eleven men missing, but he had no leads on where they ended up, so he turned that problem over to Sinden and her intelligence network.

In a way it was a relief: he wasn't required to make a hard decision between going after the men, or Carla and the women. His duty and his desires lined up perfectly on this one.

As did his fears.

* * *

Five days in transit was a hellish time for Straker, his imagination providing some of the worst suggestions possible for the ordeal Carla and the other women must be undergoing. The only consolation for him consisted of thin logic and reason: the Predators must be taking them to the nebula for a purpose, a purpose that meant preserving their captives, he must believe. And, the Predators would also need several days to make the transit, so whatever was happening at the other end, those travel days could be eliminated from his calculations.

So Zaxby argued, anyway. In Straker's mind, those days Carla was aboard an enemy ship did nothing but add potential torture.

He occupied himself as best he could, exercising furiously, running VR military drills for his ground troops, studying the many reports about Hell's Reach—lots of information, very little confirmation. And he drank too much. He vaguely remembered something he'd read long ago, about helplessness, drinking and knowing things. That's how he felt—physically helpless, reduced to a mind that knew too much, yet not enough.

When *Trollheim* finally transited in immediately outside the Hellheim Nebula, it was a relief. Straker wished he could choose an arrival location nearer their target, but the amount of churning mass inside made the entire zone into curved space. As with a star system, once inside, sidespace was inaccessible—no fancy jumps, no easy escape. The ship would have to deal with the situation as it came.

In a way, it threw them back to the days of interplanetary travel, or even sailing ships: forging through unknown waters, risking hidden shoals or submerged rocks, keeping a sharp-eyed lookout for signs of sudden squalls, tides and currents—and potential enemies.

The bridge displays filled with information and the holotank built a map of the area within seconds. Off the ship's armored prow, its usual long-distance view was limited by a wall of gas, particles and micro-asteroids—a brackish sea, a soup, filling the void. It seemed to be held together by a membrane of electromagnetic force, drawing a distinct barrier.

Inside, visibility would vary from mere kilometers out to millions, but seldom farther. Considering the usual distance from a star to a habitable planet was at least 100 million kilometers, this meant they would travel slowly, through a space-going fog.

Fortunately, gravimetric sensors should give them warning of the bigger masses around them—roughly anything the size of the ship itself or larger

—but the faster they traveled, the more they’d run into. Shields and reinforcement would keep them safe, but they cost power and therefore precious fuel. Straker could see how a ship could rapidly get into trouble.

“Captain Salishan?”

The tall, rawboned woman in the captain’s chair turned her face to him—a face weathered by her passion for that old-fashioned blue-water sailing she was known to indulge in. He’d heard she’d already explored parts of Utopia by sea-kayak, built with her own hands.

“Yes, General?”

“Naturally, I’d like to cut our travel time to the minimum, but I’ll rely on your judgment as to what the ship and crew can take. Risking a thousand to retrieve six is what Breakers do—but we do it the smart way, understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“With that in mind, let’s get moving.”

“Aye aye, sir. Shields, five percent. Reinforcement, five percent. Pressor beam on SAI automatic. Weapons on standby, but keep them under the armor for now. Helm, enter the nebula and proceed on our designated course, all ahead slow. Take it easy until you get a feel for it.”

The helmsman, Tomlinson, plied his controls. “Aye aye, ma’am.”

Trollheim moved closer and closer to the wall of gas and dust. Parts of it glowed, parts were dark. The ship’s many sensors continued to build a picture as they approached. The demarcation was surprisingly sharp, as if some principle held the nebula apart from the empty space around it. The brainiacs believed it was a combination of gravity and electromagnetics, but Straker couldn’t help feeling it was something more.

The ship’s speed built slowly. The engineering officers at their stations muttered to each other and their counterparts deep in the ship, adjusting power flows to the defenses as the ship drove herself into, and then through the gas and debris like an icebreaker through an arctic sea. The smaller debris was deflected by the light shielding.

Larger pieces, if they couldn’t be dodged, were shoved away by the pressor beam—the inverse-tractor beam, based on Crystal tech. If all those measures failed and a chunk got through, *Trollheim* took it on her heavily armored and reinforced prow. She could easily handle it, though every collision wore away a tiny fraction of her protection.

The Sensors officer spoke up. "I've got something unusual..." He fiddled with his board, and the holotank changed colors. "Dead ahead, multiple—a massive number of bogies. Millions, maybe. Not... not debris. Mobile. Self-propelled."

"Cease acceleration. Are they ships?"

"I'm reading soft matter, not dense. I think they're living creatures, ma'am."

"Route around them."

The helmsman turned to his captain. "I'm slowing us on impellers, but look at them, ma'am. Going around would delay us by hours."

"Sensors, I need more information. What are they? Are they dangerous?"

"Something is," Straker said, pointing at the holotank.

Ahead of them, filling half the holotank image, was an uncountable swirl of elongated tubular shapes. Off to one side, other, similar shapes, smaller but moving faster, darted through the edges of the swirl. Where they intersected, the larger, slower creatures disappeared.

"Predators and prey," Straker said. "Sharks and big fish. Raise to alert status one and cruise through slowly. Avoid the sharks if possible."

"Alert status one. Helm, continue on your general course. Speed and deviations at your discretion."

"Aye aye."

Straker kept his eyes roving across the displays, as the main forward screen showed little but colorful swirls of ionized gases and debris striking the forward shields. Other screens showed scans from a variety of sensors. None seemed helpful, except the holotank, which integrated all the information and extrapolated in three dimensions—vaguely. "Why don't we launch a spy drone ahead?"

"It would never survive, sir," the Sensors officer replied. "Once outside our shields, I'd measure its lifespan in seconds. We may be moving slowly for a ship, but we're still slamming into the small stuff at thousands of KPH. We are our own best recon, right now. If we get some open space, maybe..."

"Right."

The blobs in the holotank became clearer as they approached, and suddenly *Trollheim* was among them. The close-range scanners showed them to be like jellyfish in their body composition, with open mouths at the

front and tentacles at the back, waving as they moved. They were big for living creatures, perhaps fifty meters long on average. They moved aside at the dreadnought's approach, ignoring the ship as they ingested gassy material from in front of them and squirted it out the back.

Straker inserted his comlink. "Straker to Zaxby. You seeing this?"

"Better than you are, I suspect, given that I'm in the intel analysis center. The creatures appear to be straining out useful nutrients and fuel, and then expelling the waste in a jet for propulsion. Very efficient."

"What about the sharks?"

"Do you wish to approach the predators for a better look?"

"Any indication they'd be a danger to the ship?"

"An existential danger? Highly unlikely—but I cannot rule it out completely. They may be able to do damage."

"We'll steer clear."

"Ah... it appears the decision has been made for us. I suggest you consult your holotank and activate weaponry. Zaxby out."

In the holotank, the sharks turned as one and arrowed directly toward the ship.

Chapter 12

Belinda on Mechrono-7, at the rhodium mine in the mountains.

“Give me two mini-grenades,” Belinda said to Brock as she stepped onto the ramp. The *Cassiel* had just landed at the edge of a snow-covered clearing, barely out of sight of the entrance to the small mining facility. The bitter wind made her shiver, and she was thankful for the spacesuit boots she wore, her revealing outfit’s only concession to the cold.

Reluctantly he handed her two of the golf-ball-sized spheres. “Press once to arm, once more to activate. Then you have five seconds.”

“Got it.”

She left Brock standing there until Raj joined his cousin, and they leaped to the rocky hillside to climb toward their ambush positions.

She trudged up the defile toward the mine entrance, covering the hundred meters in an affected stagger, as if she were exhausted. She didn’t have to fake being cold, especially as she’d rubbed some snow in her hair and on her tunic to add to the authenticity of her ruse.

When she reached the small open area in front of the mine entrance, she saw a large prefab yurt bolted down to the flattened rock. A face appeared at one of its windows, and then the door opened. Two miners stepped out onto the snowy ground, pulling on parkas as they stared.

“Help!” she cried in a pitiful wail. “Oh, thank the gods, help me!” Then she collapsed.

Belinda felt herself carried into the yurt and placed on a bed, so she mimed regaining consciousness. “I’m so c-cold,” she said, examining her rescuers from behind slitted eyes.

One was a young human man, bearded, his mouth hanging open and staring. The other was a furry biped, with a short muzzle like a bear, though she hadn’t seen his species before. The man rushed to get her something hot in a cup while the bear-man covered her with a blanket.

The drink turned out to be a salty instant soup. Horrible. She forced herself to sip gratefully.

“What happened to you?” the man asked.

“I escaped from a cruel Manager,” she said. “Please, don’t let him take me back.”

The bear-man looked out the window. “We should call this in.”

“No, wait,” the human said, licking his lips. “So you’re a Contractor, huh?”

Belinda nodded, wide-eyed.

The man knelt next to the bed. “You feeling better, honey? That drink fix you up?”

“Better, yes, thanks.” She gave him a shy smile guaranteed to get his blood pumping. “But I’m still cold. Is there a shower in here, or a bath?”

“Ah, no, but there’s hot water in the sink.”

“No, I need to get clean and warm... take off my clothes... I’m so dirty and cold... is there something in the...” she pointed toward the mine entrance. “I’d be so grateful.”

The human’s eyes darted back and forth while the bear-man watched impassively. “We can warm up in here. I’ll help you. Frod, why don’t you go report this in person?”

“I’ll use the landline, Brill.”

“No, the landline’s broke.”

“The landline ain’t broke!”

Brill leaped up, grabbed the landline pickup and jerked the wire out of the box. “Now it’s broke. Get it?”

Frod stared at Brill for a long moment, and then shrugged. “Okay.” He trudged out, slamming the door.

“Okay, baby, I rescued you, so you’re gonna be grateful.” Brill threw down his parka and stripped off his clothes as fast as he could.

Her ears caught the faint sound of a scuffle outside. She’d never have noticed it if she wasn’t listening.

“Ease up, Brill,” she said, “and I’ll—”

Her attempt to slow him down was cut off by the heel of his hand smacking her across the face. “Shut up!”

So that’s how it’s gonna be, she thought. She tried to shove him off her, but he was strong and becoming angry. She concentrated on blocking his hands, but he’d gotten one on her neck while the other scrabbled at her clothing, trying to rip it off...when the yurt’s door banged open and Loco strode inside.

Two hammering fists changed Brill’s attitude. Loco threw Brill to the floor and laid him out with a kick to the jaw. Belinda rolled into Loco’s arms and clung to him for a moment.

“Thanks,” she said.

Loco drew back with an awkward smile. “You’re welcome.” He rushed out the door.

Poor guy, Belinda thought. He seemed easily confused by women—like most men.

She genuinely hoped he and Chiara could make a go of it. They seemed compatible.

Then again, if Loco turned out to be available... she’s have first shot at him herself.

Belinda extracted the grenades from their hiding place and held them in her hands. No need for these after all, she thought. Not yet, anyway.

She quickly pulled her clothes back together and added a parka. The grenades went into its pockets.

* * *

Brock and Raj had already ambushed the bear-man at the mine entrance by the time Loco got Belinda out of her jam. He admired her for her willingness to risk herself, but he wasn’t going to let anything happen to her. He knew it was mostly his biologically programmed protectiveness toward women, but even so...

Biologically... biotech... damn, he suddenly wished he’d thought to bring Breaker Bug serum, to treat Belinda. Then she’d be strong enough to fend off assholes like that without him. He cursed himself for being so unprepared for this trip, and cursed Chiara for rushing him off without doing even a sketchy operations order checklist to try to think of what might be needed. Cosmos-damned... God-damned woman was always trying to hold onto the upper hand by keeping him in the dark and dependent on her. At least this time she stayed in the ship, letting the professionals handle the combat op.

He followed the badgers into the mine, readying his slugthrower and activating his optical implant that extended his vision up and down the EM scale, infrared to ultraviolet. As soon as he did, he saw the two Mellivor forty meters ahead of him. “Loco behind you,” he said into his comlink.

“Roger.”

The initial tunnel ended fifty meters in. The badgers went left and right, and Loco jogged forward to catch up. He could hear the thrum and clank of

heavy machinery, and then the sound of the suppressed slugthrowers his two comrades carried.

“Three down—two workers, one spider,” Brock said.

“Roger. Coming in.” Loco entered a large, roundish room with a high ceiling. Two bus-sized processing modules hummed and made intermittent grinding noises. Steel tracks carried ore carts right up to their intakes, where a simple semi-automated rig lifted the bins and dumped them into the machines.

Loco wondered why it wasn’t more modern before he remembered Mechron. Would the machine really see into a mountain? Apparently the miners weren’t taking any chances by installing molecular nano-processors.

The badgers dragged the two dead humanoids and the pink spider behind a module while Loco stood watch, and then returned, ready. “Which way, sir?”

Loco considered. One tunnel had the tracks—clearly, that was the mine proper. The other was smoothed rock. “Raj, watch the mine. We’ll clear this one.” He walked toward the second tunnel.

“Let me lead, sir,” Brock said. “Your slugthrower is noisy.”

“Right.” Loco let Brock go past, and backed him up, making a mental note to get a suppressor fashioned for his low-tech weapon, like the badgers had.

Down the tunnel they found living quarters. Brock put a silent bullet in the brain of one humanoid they found awake. The other, lucky for him, was sleeping. Loco knocked him out with a stroke of his weapon’s butt, and then zip-tied his hands and feet. Killing enemies in cold blood didn’t bother him much, but the miners might be guilty of nothing worse than working for the spiders—maybe not even freely, so he preferred to let them live if it didn’t jeopardize the mission.

They’d cleared four rooms before an ugly vermillion flash caused Loco to bark a warning and spin into a doorway.

Brock snarled and followed, crouching in pain. “Laser,” he said, showing Loco a nasty burn across his left shoulder. He released his slugthrower, letting its sling catch it, and one-handed an auto-injector from an easy-pull pouch. He jammed it into his shoulder with a sigh. “Battle cocktail. I’m good.”

Loco was already turning away, palming a mini-grenade from the dispenser on his belt. He pressed the stud twice and rolled it down the

passageway toward the laser-wielder, counting to five. As it blew, he rolled another into the smoke kicked up by the first, and then followed it cautiously. When the second one detonated, he charged forward, Brock right behind him.

Two spiders lay twitching, still hot and visible in the infrared spectrum through the smoke. He felt the thrill of the righteous kill, the joy of one predator destroying another. His slugthrower roared at movement to the right, and he advanced in a combat crouch, firing. A laser lit the smoke with an audible *fzzzt*. Loco backtracked it and put a burst of bullets into its origin.

Brock fired from behind him and to his left as they groped through the smoke. His improved vision only helped a little, and he followed walls around to try to make sure he'd cleared every room and peered into every space for any sign of body heat from an Arattak. He joined Brock as the furry biped rounded a corner, and then he lowered his weapon. "I think we're clear."

"Let's not think," Brock said. He whipped out an old-fashioned killmore with nothing but a tripline trigger and set it up as they backed down the passageway. He scooped up dust from the floor and sprinkled it on the nearly invisible wire.

Movement, and the skitter of something rolling on the floor. They spun as one to see a spider raise its weapon as it rose from a crouch, hidden behind a workbench. Fast as he was, Loco wasn't fast enough, and he faced his death as the laser's sight drew a line to his forehead.

And then a blast knocked the creature sideways. The laser flashed and the coherent light struck Loco's body armor instead of his head. Pain washed through his chest and he staggered as Brock finished off the enemy with a quick burst. The badger raised his weapon as another shadowy figure appeared behind the clearing dust, but fortunately he didn't fire.

"You're welcome," Belinda said, juggling her remaining grenade with an insolent grin.

"Thanks," Brock replied, eyes wide.

Loco took a deep breath and clamped down on the spreading pain of the deep burn. He considered a battle cocktail, but decided against it. Let the Breaker Bug do its work. He did feel the first edges of the ravaging hunger to come as the microbes in his blood turbocharged his body's healing. Nothing was free, and energy had to come from somewhere.

Back at the processing room, Raj waved from his covered position behind an ore cart. “Nothing.”

“We have to assume one of those spiders had a radio comlink,” Loco said, hawking and spitting dust. “So they know we’re coming. It’s a frontal assault. Any ideas?”

Raj unclipped two cylinders from his harness. “Riot gas. We’re vaccinated. You have a mask, sir?”

“No.” Loco glanced around and found what he was hoping for on the wall—a respirator box. He pulled out one of the facemask-bottle combos and slipped it on, flipped its switch. “Will the gas affect spiders?”

“Their eyes. They have sensitive eyes.”

Brock took out two more gas grenades. “Let’s go.”

“I’ll take point,” Loco said.

“Sir—”

“Either of you have opticals?”

They shook their heads. “Too high-tech. Do you?”

“I do—an implant. I decided to risk it. For that matter, I’m surprised the spiders are risking lasers.”

Brock shrugged. “If Mechron vaporizes us, at least we’ll never feel it.”

“That’s encouraging. I go first. Be ready to roll the gas ahead.”

“Roger wilco, sir.”

“And Belinda, get back to the ship. Now!” he snapped at her petulant glare. “You did great, but you’re not trained for this.”

“I just saved your life.”

“Maybe so, but that’s irrelevant. Let us handle the rest of it.”

Belinda rolled her eyes and walked away.

“I wish she... ” Brock said watching her go with a wistful expression. “Never mind.”

“Keep your head in the game, man,” Loco said. “Here, I have an idea.” He got behind an empty ore cart and rolled it to the tunnel entrance. Then he picked up a piece of spider carapace, one that still had some meat on it. “Set your gas grenade to detonate if this is handled.” He mimed what he wanted, creating a booby-trap in the otherwise empty bed of the core cart.

Then he pushed the cart in front of him as he took point.

Twenty or thirty meters ahead he saw movement, so he shoved the cart smoothly down the tunnel. It rolled easily around a bend and to a halt. He

flatfooted it carefully forward over the tracks, tracks that would not have been out of place in the Wild West of Old Earth.

Another flash of movement caught their eye. “Roll the gas,” Loco hissed. He wasn’t sure his muffled order had reached the badgers until a cylinder went past him, tossed ahead to clatter on the ground, also around the corner.

When the gas gushed out he advanced. He heard a cry and another popping burst of gas, and then yells and the sizzle of a laser weapon. These sounds mixed with retching and incoherent words, along with a few vile curses and the thuds of impacts.

As he rounded the corner he spotted a spider, but it was tangled up with humanoid figures in the gas and smoke. He walked straight up to the struggling mass and didn’t fire until the barrel of his slugthrower touched the spider’s braincase. After he blew the arachnoid’s head off, he backed off and began shouting. “Everybody freeze! Badgers, hold your fire!”

They waited. Somebody turned on a light, then more lights. Fits of coughing sounded, and the figures resolved themselves into gasping, choking, vomiting humans.

“Thank God you’re here, sir,” came a human voice. “We knew you’d come.”

Chapter 13

Hell's Reach. Bridge of the SBS *Trollheim*.

"Point defense, weapons free," Captain Salishan ordered as the sharks shot toward them. "Manual fire confirmation. Fire on *only* what appears to be attacking us. Secondaries, stand by."

The Weapons officers passed her orders to the defensive weaponry crews, each in control of a bank of small lasers—small for a dreadnought, that is. Each was large and powerful enough to destroy a shipkiller missile or an attack craft at ten thousand kilometers.

Only nobody had ten thousand kilometers visibility. Rather, they were lucky to see one hundred, and effective range would be measured in single digits as the gas and dust absorbed the laser energy.

"Damn, those things are fast," Sensors muttered. "One thousand KPH and rising."

Straker saw Salishan glance at him. He knew what she was thinking—should she play it safe and open fire with the longer-ranged, more powerful secondaries? Would Straker judge her for being too trigger-happy—or too reticent? What if these creatures were sentient, and simply investigating at high speed?

He walked over to stand by her chair and spoke quietly. "Don't worry about what I think. I don't hang officers for doing their duty. The ship is yours. Use your best judgment."

She nodded once, sharply. "Secondaries, stand by. Point defense, this isn't a duck hunt. Be sure they're hostile before firing. We don't even know they can damage a warship." She covered her comlink with her hand and spoke aside to Straker. "Though we don't know they can't."

"Hard to sit here and rely on the decisions of young lieutenants and spacers, isn't it?"

"Burden of command. Tradeoff." She stared at the display. "One of your struggles, I imagine."

"Damn right. I always want to be in the thick of it, with eyes on. It's taken a while to learn restraint, and even then..."

"You can't always hold back."

"Privileges of command—and a mechsuit." He jerked his chin. "Here they come."

Salishan raised her voice. "Give us fused optical on the main screen. I want to see them."

Her order brought a picture of one of the hundreds of sharks arrowing toward them. It had a front-oriented mouth or intake like the jellyfish, but there the resemblance ended. Instead of a soft, rubbery body, it looked like an atmospheric ramjet missile, with triangular control fins protruding from its fuselage and tail. The scale overlay showed them to be about fifteen meters long.

"Ramsharks, let's call them," Salishan breathed. "Lovely, scary and deadly."

Straker made sure his comlink external speaker was on. "Zaxby, what are they made of? Short answer."

"High-strength bio-metal alloy."

"Can they hurt us?"

"Not if we increase shield power to maximum. They should be deflected or destroyed."

"If they hit us without shields?"

"Yes, if they attack hull emplacements—turrets, antennas. There will be damage."

"Attack how?"

"They appear to simply crash straight through their soft prey, ingesting nutritious pieces as they move. I have no idea how they will see the *Trollheim*—as a large meal, as an inedible asteroid, a competitor, or something else entirely. Also... "

"Yes?"

"We don't know if they have some other ability—attack or defense. I'm reading a high level of electrostatic charge around them as they fly, in the megawatt range. That could cause further damage if released."

"Thanks." He turned to Salishan. "You heard?"

"Yes, sir." She waited, watching the chrono countdown until it reached seven seconds. "Shields to maximum!"

The ship hummed with power as energy dumped from the capacitors. Maximum shields could only be held for ten to fifteen seconds before the capacitor batteries needed recharging.

The herd—school?—of ramsharks spaced themselves out in a bean-shaped grouping, its long axis perpendicular to the dreadnought's cigar shape. Three of the creatures drew ahead—and slammed themselves

straight into the shield. They crumpled and exploded with a spectacular energy discharge.

Zaxby spoke in Straker's ear. "In weapons terms, the combination of kinetic and electrostatic energy created a 3.4-ton-equivalent explosion. Enough to destroy a turret."

"Impressive. More impressive is, they sent in scouts first. They're smart. Look at that."

The school of ramsharks was already splitting in two, each end veering aside to flow around the dreadnought's sides, outside the shell of the shield. But what would happen when...

"Shield max ended," the Engineering officer reported. "Recharge mode or maintain?"

"Maintain," Salishan replied. This would keep as much shielding up as the generators could support, but it left no energy to recharge the capacitors.

With the change in shield power, the ramsharks sent another trio inward to crash into the barrier. These made it through, with a spectacular discharge of energy.

"Their electrostatics allowed them to penetrate our weaker shields," Zaxby said in Straker's ear.

"Point defense fire!" Salishan barked, and beams lanced out to destroy the creatures.

"Apparently they see us as competitors," Straker murmured.

"Or a big, fat whale to be taken down in a pack, like orcas," Zaxby replied. "In fact, these creatures are acting more like wolves or orcas than sharks, attacking in a specific, coordinated manner and risking individuals for the good of the pack."

"Yes. They—"

But his comment was cut off by the cry of the Sensors officer. "They're attacking."

As if at a signal, the entire pack turned inward as one.

Against a creature the size of the dreadnought this was probably an optimal tactic, surrounding it and hitting it from all sides. Unfortunately for the ramsharks, *Trollheim* had complete point defense coverage in three dimensions. Her lasers, made for taking down incoming shipkillers, were fast, accurate, and deadly. As the ramsharks accelerated to attack, those lasers reaped an appalling toll.

But no defense was perfect, especially against a suicidal mass attack. No doubt the ramsharks didn't realize the ship was clad in heavy armor. Perhaps they were attracted by the richness of its apparently nutritious carcass. And, they made the natural mistake of aiming for the skin, rather than the turrets that to them probably appeared as spines to be avoided.

This lucky circumstance meant that those ramsharks that made it through the storm of fire slammed straight into reinforced armor, leaving shallow divots, but little else. In moments, not a living ramshark remained.

The school of jellyfish cruised onward, oblivious.

The entire bridge let out a sigh of relief. "No damage," Chief Gurung reported from his station. The Gurkha had twisted arms and called in favors to take over as *Trollheim*'s senior noncom—no doubt eager for action after a year of boring duty parked at Utopia.

"Secure from alert level one," Salishan ordered. "Maintain level two. Continue on course. Chief, I could use some of your famous caff."

Gurung passed her a sip-mug of his triple-strong brew. Salishan made a face as she tasted it, but didn't complain. "Breakers one, Hellheim Nebula zero."

"A good start," Straker replied, "but we need to keep up that perfect score. I'll be on comlink."

He left the bridge to make his rounds, as he usually did after an action. Command presence—shaking hands, calling by name as many spacers and troops as he could remember, seeing their faces—always buoyed morale. People liked to be noticed and valued. He took out his old battered handtab, pulled up the ship's organizational chart, and checked off each section as he visited it. There were hundreds of spacers on the huge ship, with duty groups as small as two, and as large as the battlesuit company of ninety-five. He'd learned long ago that if he didn't do it methodically, he'd end up seeing the same people over and over, and never see some of the more obscure sections. What he didn't see today, he'd visit tomorrow, and so on.

"You may not want to go in there, sir," Gurung said from behind him as he left Propulsion and angled up toward Stores.

Straker turned and raised an eyebrow in question.

The short, smiling man took his hand in a grip of iron. "There's not much privacy on a ship with more than one thousand crew—and this ship is more full than normal."

"Really?"

He grinned wider, not letting go of Straker's hand. "I thought it wise to reinforce our numbers of spacers, as we're sure to be watch-on-watch. This means convenient, small rooms like those in Stores are always... occupied."

As if on cue, a man and a woman strolled out of the area with elaborate casualness. Upon seeing their general and chief, they both reddened. "Good day, sir, Chief," they chorused as they slipped by.

Straker thought he heard the woman stifle a giggle as she rounded a corner. "I see. Actually, I see nothing. Thanks, Chief. Now let me go."

Gurung released Straker's hand. "Sorry, sir." Clearly the man wasn't sorry—he'd done Straker a favor, saving him and the enlisted from embarrassment. Officers and senior noncoms of course had their own private staterooms in which to... liaise.

"Not at all, Chief," Straker told him. "I trust you have the crew well in hand. Carry on."

"I'll walk with you, if you don't mind, sir."

"Keep the boss out of trouble, eh?"

"I have no idea what you mean, sir," Gurung said with a straight face.

"I'll bet."

The two men strolled to the next section.

The encounter with the lovers turned Straker's mind once more to Carla, causing his heart to ache with suppressed fear and worry. What the hell had possessed him to let her go along on a transport, barely able to defend itself from one ship, let alone several? He should have... but no, that was nonsense. There'd never been any problems with the trade run to the Humbar, never any inkling of the ability to intercept a ship randomly arriving from sidespace.

Was it possible there was still a traitor or mole in their midst? Someone who'd leaked information, intentionally or not, about the *Hercules*, rather than some unknown tech being the cause? It seemed an unbelievable coincidence that they got Carla. Yet, if someone was talking, wouldn't the fleet that attacked the Humbar have hit Utopia, the real prize, instead?

All these thoughts and more ran around his head like rats in a confined space. He smiled and greeted and shook hands, not showing his feelings for the sake of the crew. Still, he kept an eye on his chrono. The target location was at least two day's travel away. His only consolation was that the Predators had to travel the same distance. Until they did, Carla was likely to be spared the worst of... whatever was to come.

Finishing up in Medical, he pulled Mara aside. “Does everyone aboard have the Bug? Because Gurung seems to have... reinforced the crew with a few off-the-books people.”

“I’ll make sure.”

“Might want to make sure everyone’s birth-control implants are up to date, too.”

Mara made a face. “Anything else?”

“How’s Roentgen doing?”

“Fine. Zaxby, Sinden and some of the techs are keeping him busy, taking readings and asking questions. Providing a few interesting answers, too. It’s funny how many mistaken assumptions species can have about each other.”

“No doubt. The fusing was... enlightening. Learn anything operationally useful?”

“His—its, whatever—specific environmental tolerances, fuel needs and consumption... all valuable, but nothing that’s sparked any epiphanies. Derek, I know you always look for some novel insight, some surprise solution, so I’ll tell you if I get one, okay? You don’t need to keep bugging me.”

“Fair enough. Later, sis.”

Straker had a meal in the wardroom, alone with his thoughts. By tradition, nobody but the most senior would approach or disturb a flag officer without a pressing duty reason. That suited him right now.

As he ate mechanically, it occurred to him how different Carla and Mara were. Carla would want him to bug her, to bring all his thoughts to her, to be a sounding board. Maybe he was instinctively turning to Mara in Carla’s absence, but his sister was more prickly and standoffish, jealous of her areas of expertise, wanting to be left alone—common brainiac traits.

When he found his plate and glass of lemonade empty, he bussed his tray to the sanitization rack and spent the next couple of hours in his office, catching up on paperwork and reading Sinden’s intel briefs on Hell’s Reach.

A klaxon sounded, raising the ship’s alert status. Straker’s intercom beeped and *Trollheim*’s SAI spoke. “General Straker to the bridge. General Straker to—”

“Acknowledged.” On his way, the ship’s passageways became suddenly busy with personnel rushing to their duty stations.

On the bridge, the holotank view showed hundreds of small proto-stars all around the ship, glowing hot only in the infrared ranges and below. Streamers of hot gasses formed an irregular structure billions of kilometers wide, a three-dimensional network. The gaps between streamers were large, allowing the ship easy access and maneuver. That's what Straker got out of the holotank view as he stepped up to its rail, anyway.

Captain Salishan said, "Sir, we've got some kind of energy vortex in front of us. When we change course or try to maneuver around, it moves with us."

"Blocking our path?"

"Not yet, but it's staying in front of us—following ahead, as my father would say about our Huskies. And it's getting closer, slowly."

The Sensors officer belatedly highlighted the phenomenon in the holotank—a blob of brightness in the shape of an artistic, multi-pointed star, its points retracting and extending as it pulsed every few seconds.

Straker asked the obvious question. "Is it any danger to us?"

"Zaxby?"

Zaxby's face appeared in an upper corner of the holotank. "My Sciences team and I are still analyzing."

"I didn't know you had a Sciences team."

"I thought it prudent to form one, given the environment."

"And Commander Sinden was getting sick of you stepping on her toes."

"I admit, there was a certain amount of inadvertent podiatric pressure, metaphorically speaking. Of course, I am far too dexterous and agile to literally step on her toes. In fact—"

Straker raised his voice. "The threat, Zaxby? The energy vortex?"

"Of course. As I was saying before you cavalierly diverted my report with discussions of the whys and wherefores of the formation of functional area sub-commands within the ship and their effect on the prerogatives of certain officers with low emotional intelligence—"

"Zaxby!"

"—the vortex contains enough energy to easily destroy us."

"Great. Do you think it wants to?"

"You presume it's intelligent?"

Straker scowled. "I presume the worst case—that it's malevolent. I need facts, Zaxby, so quit screwing around and get me some, or I'll put you and your team under Sinden's command."

“There’s no need for vulgar threats.”

“With you, there is. Get to work and get me info, dammit!”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“Comms, get me Sinden.”

Sinden’s image replaced Zaxby’s. “Sir?”

“Your assessment of the vortex, Nancy?”

“Extremely dangerous, sir. If it’s a temporary electromagnetic phenomenon, it might discharge completely upon touching us, and we wouldn’t survive. If it’s persistent, even alive in some azoic fashion, a discharge of a mere one percent of its available energy would damage us severely.”

Straker turned to Salishan. “Thoughts?”

“Turn around, go around. It’s too dangerous.”

“I agree. Do it.”

“Helm, bring us about.”

The helmsman turned the ship smoothly but tightly through 180 degrees, until she was pointing along a reverse course directly away from the vortex.

“That’s not good,” Salishan said as she pointed at the holotank.

Straker saw the vortex move faster, now chasing the ship and closing. “Might want to—”

“All ahead full, maximum acceleration!”

The deck plates rumbled with the sudden application of full thrust, the dreadnought’s six fusion engines pouring power and reaction mass into a high-energy stream astern. In response, the vortex closed the distance even more, hovering in the ship’s wake, unaffected by the high-energy particles and plasma forming the exhaust plume.

“Do you get the impression it likes fusion drive plasma?” Straker asked.

“Maybe. Helm, cut engines. Impellers only.”

The vortex surged closer.

“Engines to full!”

The vortex stopped approaching, but maintained its distance, now down to short weapons range.

“Sinden, now would be a good time for some new insight,” Straker said.

“Sir, there’s no way to tell if its actions are instinctive or intelligent—or purely mechanistic. We appear to have attracted its attention, and now, if I had to guess, I’d say we’re feeding or warming it, perhaps as a plant turns

toward sunlight. If so, this may be good news—it's unlikely to expend energy destroying something it likes."

"Or hates," Straker said. "Remember the ramsharks. We can't stake the ship on guesses."

"At least its pursuit distance seems to have stabilized," Captain Salishan said. "Helm, reduce power to one-half."

The vortex came closer, to point-blank range.

"Full power!"

The vortex backed off.

Zaxby's image appeared alongside Sinden's. "It seems to have a comfort range, much like someone sitting by a fire—not too hot, not too cold. It is absorbing heat, electromagnetic and radioactive energy from our wake."

Straker said, "If we turn up the heat, it likes it. If we turn down the heat, it tries to get closer. What if we turn everything off? Shut it all down, go EMCON?"

"That is a tactic with highly polarized outcomes, I assess."

"Meaning?"

"The vortex may depart—or it may touch us in an attempt to 'revive' its fuel source."

Sinden said, "Why would such a powerful vortex be interested in us, though? The proto-stars surrounding us emit far more energy, in all spectra and of all types."

A mechanical voice spoke from behind Straker. At first he thought it was the ship's SAI, but then he realized it was Roentgen, in his suit, recently arrived. "It is sentient."

Straker turned. "The vortex?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I can see its thoughts."

The entire bridge gawked at the Thorian. "Ridiculous," the Sensors officer said. "No information can get through our hull, our reinforcement, our shields... "

"Stupid person. Straker knows I do not lie."

"Of course not, Roentgen. The officer spoke out of ignorance. But how can you see its thoughts?"

"Neutrinos... No known shielding can stop neutrinos."

The Sensors officer clamped his jaw shut in apparent disbelief, but said nothing.

“What’s it thinking?” Straker asked.

“I do not know. Do you know what a human thinks when you scan its brain and detect electrical activity? Yet you know it thinks. It does not seem hostile.”

“Understood. Thanks, Roentgen. That’s invaluable. Can you... can you communicate with it?”

“Possibly. I need tools.”

“Go to Zaxby. He’ll help you with anything you need.”

“I will go.” The Thorian stumped out on its four short legs.

“General,” Salishan said, “we’re burning fuel at a high rate. If the vortex is sentient... ”

“You think it’s smart enough not to kill what interests it?”

“How can we know? Biologists happily kill plants and animals in order to dissect them.”

Chapter 14

Loco on Mechrono-7, in the rhodium mine.

Loco recognized the thickset spacer trying to rise from the rocky debris of the mine floor. “Sylvester? Stay down and take it easy.” He’d have helped the Breaker to his feet, except his chest was filled with the pain of the laser burn, making him dizzy and lightheaded. Instead, Loco found a chair and sat in it while the badgers sorted out Breakers from miners and made sure no more spiders lurked.

He activated his comlink. “Captain Jilani, come in.”

“Jilani here.”

“You got Belinda?”

“Got her. I’m on my way. You all right?”

“We’ll live. We’ve secured the facility and are sorting things out. Stand by.” The gas seemed to be clearing fast—an air filter roared overhead, part of the mining equipment.

“Who’s senior here?” he asked the team.

Sylvester stood unsteadily. “Me, sir, now that Bortmann’s... well, the spiders ate him. Anyway, me. I’m on the Chief’s list.”

“You’re promoted early. Give me a count of your people, Chief.”

Sylvester directed his men into a ragged line and checked them. “Eleven including me, present and accounted for, sir.”

“Any idea where the women are?”

Sylvester turned to the Breakers. “Anyone?”

They shook their heads and murmured. “No, Chief.”

Loco turned to the five miners still alive, all humanoid, sitting zip-tied on the floor under the badgers’ guns. “How about you? Any idea where six of our women might have been taken?”

They hung their heads, denying all knowledge.

“The women were separated from us on the Arattak ship before we got here,” Sylvester offered. “Admiral Engels—they were all alive last time we saw them. Even though Bortmann...”

“What?”

“Sounds weird, sir, but I think we were lucky we were taken by the spiders instead of the Korven.”

Loco grimaced bleakly. “Probably. You might all be hatching little Korvens out your asses about now instead of working in an Arattak mine.”

“Yeah, that’s what the miners told us. They weren’t such bad guys, most of them.”

Chiara’s voice came from down the tunnel. “Renzo!”

One of the eleven, a young spacer, took three steps toward the voice, then stopped as if holding himself back. “*Permesso*, Chief?”

Sylvester jerked his head. “Go on, Alfonsi.”

Lorenzo met Chiara as she entered the cavern. They exchanged hugs and cheek-kisses and spoke in joyful rapid Italian. Chiara shoved him playfully back to his shipmates and glanced around, toeing at a piece of spider gore on the floor. “What a mess. Let’s get out of here before our luck runs out.”

Loco nodded. “Agreed. Everyone get moving to the ship.”

“What about these guys, boss?” Brock asked Loco.

“Hey, who’s paying you?” Chiara snapped.

“Sorry, right you are, Captain,” Brock replied. “Your orders?”

She ran her eyes over the facility. “Leave them tied up. If they can’t get free on their own, they deserve to die. Search and destroy any comms gear you find. Are there vehicles? Aircars?”

“No, Captain,” Raj said. “Nothing but ore carts.”

“Where’s the processed rhodium? Anyone?”

After a moment, Sylvester replied, “I’ll show you.”

They found it in a locked storeroom, hundreds of kilos of hard shiny silvery-gray metal ingots. Chiara’s eyes lit with avarice. “Get this aboard. Everybody carry as much as you can.”

Loco moved closer. “Do we have enough lift capacity once we fit all our people?”

Chiara hesitated just enough to make Loco wonder. “Of course. If not, we can always dump something less valuable.”

“How valuable is this?”

“Twenty or thirty thousand a kilo. All we have to do is get to the Living city and we can trade it for credit.”

Loco raised his eyebrows. He was beginning to get a sense of money now, and that was several months’ pay in each one-kilo ingot. Besides, he was hungry, and not in a mood to argue or delay. “Go ahead.”

Belinda lowered the *Cassiel*'s ramp as the fifteen figures tramped through the thin snow and onto the ship. They stacked their rhodium ingots in cases in the hold, strapped them down, and then shuffled to the two staterooms, squeezing past each other.

"Pack it in, *paisanos*," Chiara said. "Sit on the floor against the walls and don't move around much. We'll be flying low and fast, so I don't need the weight to shift. Lifting in one minute."

After strapping herself into the pilot's seat—Loco in the copilot's—she fired up the engines and tilted the ship on her struts to aim just above the nearest ridge. "We're going zero to full power in one four-G surge," she said over the intercom. "You have thirty seconds to prep—move anything that might fall on you."

"What if we don't make it high enough?" Loco asked.

"Then we'll never know we failed, because we'll impact at about 400 KPH. Ten... nine... "

At zero, the *Cassiel* leaped upward on pure fusion thrust. One and a half seconds later, the stubby wings began to bite the air and provide lift and control as the nose dipped, aiming straight at the mountainside.

Three seconds later, the nose ticked upward toward clear sky.

Six seconds later, the ship buffeted with compression as they cleared the ridge by at least a good twenty meters. Loco let out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding in one long sigh. "I wasn't sure we'd make it."

"I dumped all the water and half the fuel to lighten ship," Chiara replied as they leveled off, skating low over the mountaintops, sticking to the thicker air. "No worries."

"You could've told me that before."

"More fun to see you sweat, Mikey."

Loco heard a chuckle and glanced behind him to see Belinda sitting on the floor against the cockpit's back wall. "Oh, like you two weren't sweating."

"We were fine," Belinda said, and she jerked her head at Chiara. "Us Contract girls have gotta stick together."

"What?"

Chiara's face froze. Loco looked from one to the other.

"Nothing," Belinda said, looking down. "Never mind."

Loco blinked and leaned his head against the padded rest. In his head, realization was dawning. Chiara had once been a Contract girl? That

clarified a few things... and raised more questions. At least he was starting to see the picture. Chiara stolen from her family, her forged Contract sold...

What kind of work had she done? Did this explain her bedroom skills—and maybe her attitude toward relationships? Toward everything, really. That had to infuse her entire world, living like that... he didn't want to imagine. What scars, what wounds must she have absorbed...

Yet, he knew instinctively she didn't want him feeling sorry for her, pitying her. Leave it for later, he told himself. "Hey, Bel, hand me a couple nutro bars, would you?"

"Sure." She retrieved a handful.

Loco stuffed concentrated food into his mouth, quelling his grumbling guts and flooding his bloodstream with relief as the proteins and carbs spread. He was feeling pretty good, was even starting to get drowsy with relief and healing when alarms whooped and shot another spike of adrenaline through his veins.

"Shit," Chiara cried. "Raj—?"

"Already on it," the badger's voice came over the intercom. A shuddering transmitted itself through the deck plates. "Missile destroyed."

"Missile?" Loco punched at his dashboard, pulling up a rear view. Behind the *Cassiel* two red icons flashed—Arattak single-seat attack ships, range three thousand meters and closing, the countermeasures computer told him. Two more icons joined them, then another two as the fighters launched four missiles.

"We should be glad they're unwilling to use lasers with Mechron watching," Chiara said as green tracers from Raj's tailgun lanced out, trying to intercept the closest missile. She reached across to Loco's side and flipped up a cover. "Chaff and flare dispenser. Use it when they get close."

Loco put his finger on the button. "Got it."

"Hang on, everyone!" Chiara dropped and rolled the ship into a shallow bank around a mountaintop, trying to put rock between *Cassiel* and the enemy. One missile followed too sharply and impacted the peak, but the other missiles kept tracking. "Goddammit, they're fire-and-forget."

Raj picked off another one before Loco judged them close enough to drop his pods. Flares fell while radar-reflective chaff burst in a flower pattern behind the ship. The missiles lost lock, but reacquired as soon as they passed the floating curtain of metallic strips.

By that time Chiara had reversed her turn and now flew lower and lower, aiming for the gaps between peaks and pushing the throttles forward to the stops. “Keep pumping that chaff,” she said.

Loco did as ordered. “How many in the pods?”

“Twenty-four. Readout just above.”

Loco saw the number stood at fourteen. The missiles continued to follow. “They must have some smart software. They’re not being fooled. Impact in three seconds.”

Chiara muttered something vile and pulled up hard, shooting out into the open in a climbing half-loop.

“Two seconds!”

She snap-rolled the ship like an aerobat and pulled her control stick hard back between her knees. The G-forces jumped to four or five and she screamed—

“Aaaauughh!”

—and the missiles flashed past. One detonated with a proximity fuse, shaking the ship, and the other ran out of fuel, vainly trying to turn back before it arced gracefully into the ground with a bright flash.

Recovering the ship, Chiara aimed it back toward the Living city. The ship shuddered, the air buffeting it roughly. “We lost a piece of wing,” she said, holding tight to the joystick and manipulating the throttles, trying to smooth out the ride. “And those fucking spiders still have at least one missile.”

Another trio of icons appeared behind them. “Make that three,” Loco said. At that moment the tail gun improbably picked off a missile from long range. “Okay, two. Nice one, Raj.”

“Thanks.” The tracers continued to fire in bursts.

“Nine seconds to impact.” Loco readied the chaff button again. “Ten more chaff.”

“I can’t maneuver,” Chiara said, “so it’s on you and Raj.” She reached over to flip up another red-striped cover on the console.

“What’s that?”

“Full-spectrum coherent EM blinder.”

“Sounds high-tech.”

“It is. If we’re gonna die anyway...”

Loco nodded and held up crossed fingers.

The two missiles bored in, jiggling randomly out of the way of Raj's tracers. The chaff didn't seem to faze the weapons.

Chiara reached for the EM blinder control. "Tell me when it's three seconds."

Loco pumped the chaff helplessly. "... Four. Three."

She pressed the button.

The missiles veered. One dove into the ground, and the other wandered away.

Loco and Chiara both shouted, startled, as a streak of glowing atmo reached toward them at high speed and stopped dead ahead.

It was a Mechron bubble.

Chiara twisted the joystick aside, shrieking again, trying to keep the ship from crashing either into the ground or the bubble. The bubble tracked in front of them, shifting to stay ahead no matter what she did, until she ran straight into it. By that time, she, Belinda and Loco were all locked into throat-straining screams—

—and they passed through the bubble's location with barely a shudder. The displays showed a streak where the craft must have departed, up into space at a speed that left air molecules glowing. At the same time, two spectacular explosions marked the locations of the Arattak fighters.

"Gods and monsters," Loco gasped. "I thought we were dead. But it killed them and not us."

Chiara eased up and concentrated on flying the damaged ship. "That's Mechron for you. Sometimes I think it has a sick sense of humor."

"Yeah. Watch me laugh." Then Loco passed out.

Loco awoke to the pain of Chiara poking a finger into his half-healed wound. "Hey! Get out of there!"

"Sorry. You weren't waking up, and you need to get out of that seat, undress and lie down. Bug or no Bug, I want to look at that burn."

"Yeah, yeah..." Despite the adrenaline from the pain of her prodding, he felt thick-headed, and everything hurt. He climbed unsteadily out of the seat and allowed himself to be led to the empty cabin. It was only then that the realization they were on the ground made it into his consciousness.

"Where's..."

"Chief Sylvester took charge of them. They're off to the Halfers ghetto with enough money for rooms, food and a little bit of fun. I hope they're as disciplined as he seemed to think."

Loco helped Chiara undress him to his shorts. “They’re military on leave. Can’t expect them to be schoolgirls.”

“I know some schoolgirls who’d wreck a joint. Lie down.”

He did, and she sponged his face and torso with disinfectant. Patches of dead skin and flesh threatened to rip free and he grunted in pain. “Leave it alone. Get me some food and painkillers. Let the Bug work.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Where’s Bel?”

“With the guys. I didn’t want her hovering.”

Loco took Chiara’s hand in his. “Thanks. For taking care of me.”

Chiara tried to jerk her hand free. “Let me go.”

He held on tight. “Never, Chiara. I—you’re—”

“Goddammit, don’t say it, Loco. You’ll ruin things. Can’t you just go with the flow?”

“I thought I could. But almost getting killed—again—makes a guy think about things. I’d like to know more about you.”

“You know enough.”

He sighed. “What does *your* training tell you about dangling secrets in front of a persistent guy?”

“My *training*?” Her face shut down, and this time she did pull her hand free—and used it to slap him across the face, hard. “Go to hell, Johnny Paloco.” She stormed out, slamming the door.

“Been there, done that,” he said to the empty room, rubbing his cheek. “Why can’t you keep your damned mouth shut, Johnny?”

A moment later, he searched for something to drink. “Shit. No beer left...” He got up gingerly, retrieved two meals from the hold, and popped them in the quick-heat. Chiara was nowhere aboard.

Loco noticed a pain in his chest. It wasn’t his wound.

Chapter 15

Hell's Reach. Bridge of the dreadnought SBS *Trollheim*.

In answer to the question of how they could know the intentions of the vortex, Sinden spoke up from her holotank vidlink image. "Xenobiologists don't kill sentient beings. At least, most rational ones don't. If this thing is truly sentient, it can see we're an artificial vessel filled with sentient creatures. Also, while we have little information on this area, there were no warnings in the data we have."

"That's thin reasoning to stake our lives on," Straker said. "Still, I believe we can back off some on the acceleration. Mercy, dial down the thrust slowly, as much as you think you can, to conserve fuel."

"Fuel's not the only problem," she replied. "Any acceleration at all, and we keep gaining speed. At some point the nebula will thicken up again and we'll be slamming into asteroids—which take more power to deflect or destroy. I have a few ideas, though..."

"Go on."

"Helm, reduce power, five percent per minute. Reverse the impellers."

"Reverse the impellers, ma'am? But that will..."

"I know. That'll push back against the fusion thrust. A waste of power, but at least we won't be accelerating as much. If we're lucky, we can get the thrust under ten percent and actually decelerate, if the vortex lets us. Plan to curve our course into a giant semi-circle as we slow down, to resume our former course. Maybe it'll eventually lose interest."

"Uh, ma'am, if we backtrack, we can be out of this area in under two hours at full thrust."

"What happens when we run into the dense part of the nebula again?"

"Full decel in reverse should blast anything aside, ma'am, stern first."

"Blast anything up to a certain size... but we can't afford to run a big rock up our asses and lose the engines, can we? There are no shipyards out here."

The helmsman looked surly. "I'm trying to balance risks, ma'am. Just my opinion. I'd rather risk the rocks than this monster."

Straker saw the captain making an effort to think that over. He himself didn't have enough information to make a decision, but he instinctively trusted Roentgen. In the fusing, he'd seen the mind behind the dreams and

visions. Thorians weren't given to speculation or guessing. If Roentgen thought the vortex wasn't hostile, odds were it wasn't.

Accidents could still happen, though.

Salishan slowly shook her head. "Thanks for your input, Mister Tomlinson, but those are my instructions."

The helmsman shot a helpless glance at Straker, and then turned back to his board with hunched shoulders. "Aye aye, ma'am."

Straker wondered what was going on in the man's head. People weren't robots, and discipline could never be taken for granted, especially when faced with death. He pulled out his handtab and made a note to bump into Lieutenant Tomlinson as soon as he could, perhaps invite him for a drink. Sometimes all it took to head off a problem was letting someone know you'd listen.

Thrust was dialed back thirty percent over the next half-hour, then reduced faster as the vortex came steadily closer but did nothing inimical. A suggestion to fire weapons had been instantly discarded—the total energy of even all the thermonuclear weapons aboard would be, in Zaxby's words, "barely a firecracker" to the vortex.

After an hour, the *Trollheim* began actually decelerating, her course curving into a circle as her impellers slowed her against the five percent thrust maintained. That thrust still threw a plume, which the vortex hugged, looming frighteningly close, but it maintained its distance even as the ship decelerated. Straker was reluctant to order complete engine shutdown for fear the vortex would unintentionally touch the *Trollheim* and damage her like an affectionate whale rubbing against a rowboat.

"How long can we maintain this situation?" Straker asked his captain.

"Days. The good news is, we're back on course now that the vortex is following behind, instead of ahead. Maybe it'll lose interest when we move out of this area. That'll allow us to slowly accelerate again on impellers alone, which takes less fuel."

"Maybe."

"Zaxby to Straker," the comlink squawked.

"Straker here."

"Roentgen and I have created a highly innovative transceiver based on neutrino interchange, expandable to muons and other particles if available. We would like permission to activate it."

Straker exchanged surprised glances with Salishan, then addressed Zaxby. “When have you ever asked permission to do anything?”

“At least two or three times in the nine years we’ve known each other, Derek Straker.”

“My point exactly. Roentgen insisted, didn’t he?”

“It, General. Not he.”

“I’ll call him ‘he’ if I feel like it. His mind felt male to me, no matter his lack of actual gender. You know, I used to call you ‘he’ when you were a neuter, and you thought that was a positive, even if inaccurate.”

“That’s because neuters are a subordinate sex—or one might say, non-sex—in Ruxin society. I felt marginalized and oppressed.”

Straker pounced. “Exactly—and you were all for neuters’ rights back then. You wanted to bring new ways to your people, more equality. So you should sympathize with me, even if I’m being technically inaccurate.”

“Not at all. Now that I’m male, I no longer give a flying fig for neuters’ rights. The traditional ways are the best. Stability and order! Everyone in their place! Females get to be on top. Males have all the fun. Neuters take the risks and do the boring, dirty work. What could be better?”

“Now that you’re a high-status male, you mean.”

“Of course. Just like in the Breakers, those on top stay on top. We are color-blind, gender-blind, sex-blind, species-blind, and merit-based. I, of course, have superior intelligence, superior physicals skills, and therefore superior merit. It’s only because of your numbers, your prejudices and your force of arms that humans still dominate the Breakers. If I had a Ruxin majority, I’d be in charge. *Quod Erat Demonstrandum*.”

“Sir...” Salishan muttered.

Straker abruptly remembered how pointless it was to argue with Zaxby, especially in public. It was fighting on Zaxby’s territory, with Zaxby’s weapons. “Whatever. Go ahead and try the transceiver—but Roentgen does all the talking to the vortex. All of it. You’re only there for tech support. Understood?”

“Derek Straker—”

“Discussion over, Zaxby. Follow orders. Keep your vidlink up and report on Roentgen’s attempt to communicate.”

“Aye aye, Your High Lord Breakership, sir.”

Straker waited. The vidlink picture of Zaxby—holo-link picture, really—performed various inscrutable actions with its tentacles. The ship

continued on its course. The tension stretched to the point of its maximum, then seemed to ease as nothing of note happened for minutes upon end.

“Come on, Zaxby—”

“Wait. Roentgen says he’s in communication via neutrino exchange. The vortex is... barely sentient, somewhere between high animal and low human intelligence, with a rudimentary language composed of single words or two-word memes. It—perhaps we should call it *she*, ha ha—is benevolently curious about us. Roentgen says she is learning from him even now, at a high rate, much as an ape would learn sign language from a human teacher. He says they are extending their conversation with muons, and asks that we drop our shields to block less particulate radiation.”

“Do it, Mercy.”

Salishan’s face took on a strained quality, but complied. “Shield power to zero.”

“Shield power zero aye.”

“Roentgen says that is better. Our transceiver has gained greater throughput. He says... he says he wishes to fuse with the creature. I suggest allowing this.”

“Why, Zaxby? It might kill him.”

“Thorians can withstand extremely high energy levels, The vortex might kill him, but he believes he can persuade the creature to withhold its energy before he dies.”

“That’s nuts.”

“Thorians don’t have a Ruxin or human-normal level of self-preservation instinct. They’re explicitly willing to die to gain knowledge or achieve something new for their people—quite admirable, but in this case extremely unwise.”

“In this case?”

“We only have the one Thorian. Had we two, I’d support the idea, but he’s an invaluable and unique resource in our current circumstances, much as I am.”

Straker shook his head in dismay. “A *resource*. Zaxby, you never cease to amaze with your ruthlessness and amorality. Roentgen is a person—and an honorary Breaker now, in my view, not merely a *resource*.”

“One moment—Aha! General, he says he wishes to undergo fission.”

“Fission? You mean he wants to... ”

“Reproduce. Divide and create two Thorians.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Perhaps not. Perhaps it’s a way out of our dilemma.”

“How long would that take, anyway?”

Zaxby considered. “Given the proper conditions, perhaps two hours. In answer to your next question, yes, that would result in two identical, adult Roentgens, each with all the knowledge of the original... who is not actually the original, anyway, as this Roentgen is merely one of many fissionings stretching back to the first Thorian ancestor creature. In fact, he already fissioned, leaving another Roentgen behind on the Thorian ship in order to personally testify to your fusing—and to that of the Humbar Ternus.”

“Weird.”

“Indeed. Further, he suggests he eventually fission several times more, so there are—in his words, not mine—‘sufficient Roentgens to die as often as necessary.’ You see, this is one reason they are so often willing to risk death. As long as there has been a recent fission, the individual lives on in his twin-descendant.”

“We can’t ask him to do that,” Straker replied. Yet he found himself wavering. “There’s no reason to. If he can keep the thing from harming us, we’ll simply sail away and wave goodbye.”

“He says if he doesn’t, the vortex is likely to try to take him anyway, as a foolish child might seize and crush a tiny creature it became obsessed with. If he—or his new sibling, the Earthan language is insufficient—if he does this thing, he may well survive within the vortex long enough for her to bring him to a place he can prosper and again reproduce. Thorians need nothing but radiation to live.”

“That’s insane!”

“*Dak kumlee*,” Salishan muttered, or something like it that Straker didn’t quite catch. She turned to him and spoke in a low, intense voice. “It may seem insane to us, sir, but my people—my ancestors on Old Earth, I mean, who lived in the arctic—were thought strange by visitors too, for some of their customs. He’s an alien, General. Like Ruxins and Opters are alien. A human might not choose to do this—but maybe he would. You and I’ve both been willing to risk our lives for others. What if you had a perfect clone that could carry on if you died?”

“A perfect clone... ” Straker gazed into her face, her passionate visage reminding him of Carla’s, in a way. He thought about the golem. “I do know something about that, actually. That’s why I’m having trouble with it.

But you're right. It's his choice, and he might save all our lives. So Zaxby, are you listening?"

"Of course."

"Give him the go-ahead—*after* he's fissioned. Set up whatever he needs for this... this craziness, and keep the bridge apprised. I'll be down soon."

In Zaxby's laboratory, a converted cargo space one deck above the infirmary, Straker found the Ruxin in his four-armed, four-legged battlesuit, with two of his gauntlets removed and replaced by safety gloves. He was working on machinery strewn across one corner of the lab, assisted by two Ruxin neuters in radiation suits.

Roentgen stood nearby, unmoving, in his own suit.

"Stay ten meters back, General," Zaxby said. "We're working with exposed Uranium-235."

"Is that a... a *nuclear warhead* you're disassembling?"

"It was the most convenient source of fissionable material I could find on short notice."

"Gods and monsters, just don't blow us up."

"There is zero chance of that. At least, not with atomic yield. The conventional explosives inside which initiate the nuclear blast are another story entirely—but I'm being careful. I calculate that there is less than a one-in-one-million chance of an accident."

"Good odds with anyone but you."

"Is that a pathetic attempt at humor?" Zaxby asked.

"Yup. Roentgen, would you come over here, please?"

The Thorian moved directly toward Straker, to stop in front of him. "I am here."

"Yeah, uh... look, I'm not entirely sure what to say."

"What is there to say?"

"If you were human, I'd say a lot."

"Friend Derek," Roentgen said, "say what you'd say if I were human."

Straker wished he could clasp hands again with Roentgen, and then realized he could—sort of. He reached out to take the Thorian's glove in a handshake, finding himself strangely moved. "We became friends when we fused. I don't want you to die."

"One of me will surely live. Perhaps both of me will live. You will see no difference. I will become two. I have fissioned before. I will fission

again. This is right and natural. This is as it should be. Besides, fission has already happened since we fused.”

“Yeah, I heard, but I don’t really understand.”

“I whom you see before you am the sibling of the one who remained with my people. After you and my parent fused, it fissioned, that the memory of our fusing and the understanding between us would be safeguarded. Fissioning means the parent is no more, yet twin child-siblings remain. So you see, the Roentgen you see before you is already once removed from the Roentgen you experienced, though complete in every detail.”

“You... you’re not actually the same one... ”

“I am not, and I am. Perhaps you should think of me as half of myself, with the other half regrown—as if you were to lose half your body, and have it regenerated. Technically you would not be the same person, but functionally, you would be.”

Straker’s mind whirled, seizing on a minor detail. “What about a suit for your... ”

“My sibling, who will be me? It will not be necessary. In the future, if I fission again, Zaxby and I will make suits as needed. Fear not, Derek. Part of me extends into the future upon a wondrous adventure. The part of me to be left behind already envies that person. Don’t you also envy that person?”

“Maybe I should, but I don’t. I’m not an explorer. I’m a warrior and a protector.”

“Then accept this as the way I protect my friend and his people. I remind you again, as strange as it is to your kind, you will not lose me. In fact, much of Thorian culture revolves around bonding, reproduction, and descendancy, as does yours. Fission and fusion are as much spiritual journeys as physical. You experience love when two humans fuse, and also when you reproduce. You are willing to die for your descendants. There is great honor in this. We are not so different.”

Straker fought back a lump in his throat, telling himself that Roentgen wouldn’t be dead even if one of him died. In fact, it wasn’t sorrow that moved him—it was honor, that willingness to sacrifice self.

An old, familiar passage from Jilani’s holy book rose in his mind: *Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*

His friend was about to do that.

Straker swallowed a lump in his throat. “I accept that, friend Roentgen. I honor you for it. I want your sibling to know that, so that whatever happens with the one who fuses with the vortex, he knows it too.”

“He will be honored and comforted by the knowledge that part of me will remain here as your fusing-friend. You sacrificed a part of yourself for our fusing. I am willing to sacrifice a part of myself for this other fusing.”

Straker sighed. “Okay. That makes me feel better.” He let go of Roentgen’s gloved hand, wishing he could fuse again... but he knew that Thorians rarely fused more than once with any one person. To do so bordered on taboo.

Zaxby carried a geodesic sphere of dull metal over to a room-sized, box-like cargo module, the kind that could be filled with anything, moved by loaders and stacked easily. He opened its access door and placed the thing inside. “Ready.”

“I must fission now. When next you see me, we will be two. There is no sorrow in this, only joy.” Roentgen raised a limb and moved to enter the module.

Straker raised his younger hand in response.

Zaxby shut the door on the Thorian, and then stripped off his gloves and dropped them into a decontaminator, replacing them with thinner, finer ones. He began reassembling the warhead, now without its atomic core. “You may approach. The cargo module is lined with shielding.”

Straker walked slowly over. “Isn’t this area contaminated?”

“Mildly. Your biotech will keep you safe. Our biotech, I should say, since I also carry the Ruxin version of the Breaker Bug, of course. I confess, your sister excels in this single area of expertise—biotech, that is.”

“How nice of you to admit it.”

Zaxby focused two eyes on Straker. “My niceness knows no bounds. Also my humility.”

Straker glanced at the module. “I presume he has everything he needs in there?”

“Of course. The uranium, and sixty kilos of other materials approximating the soil of the Thorian homeworld. Roentgen will first ingest much of that. His body will process it and divide, resulting in two Roentgens, in about two hours. By that time I will have moved the module to one of the aft cargo airlocks, where both will emerge. The Roentgen to stay will be in his suit, while the one to go will be naked—the usual state of

Thorians in their own environment, I might add. He will simply leap into space astern and be left behind, floating, for the vortex to pick up within seconds.”

“I can’t imagine... ”

Zaxby laid a tentacle on Straker’s shoulder, an unusual gesture for him. “I disagree. I think you *can* imagine—the isolation, the risk, the alienation—and that’s what bothers you. Look on the bright side. He may survive. If I were able to fission and guarantee the continuance of at least one Zaxby, I would be happy to do the same.”

“Maybe I would too.”

“You already did, with the golem.” The tentacle left his shoulder. “I suggest you leave me to my work, Derek Straker. Go have an alcoholic drink with a comrade. That’s the usual human response to emotional overload, isn’t it?”

“One of the healthier ones. Good idea. Comlink me when it’s time to... ”

“To say farewell?” Zaxby asked. “I will.”

“Thanks, Zaxby. I probably don’t tell you this enough, but... you’re a good friend too.”

“Undoubtedly I am, and you’re fortunate to have me.”

“Oh, shut the hell up.” Straker left the laboratory, surprised at how unsteady he felt. It must be the effect of the fusion, creating a strange, unique intimacy he struggled to process. His feet turned toward the wardroom rather than his office, as if of their own accord. Both places had ample bars, with access to all the mild drugs the Breakers allowed aboard—alcohol, intoxicating plant derivatives, nicotine and its variants, combinations of relatively safe designer stims—but he found he wanted company.

At least, he didn’t want to be alone.

He spotted Tomlinson with a whiskey bottle and a shot glass. After grabbing a beer, he took a seat across from the helmsman. When the man looked up, Straker knocked his bottle against the other’s. “Woman troubles?”

The lieutenant snorted derisively, clearly quite drunk already. He’d need one of Mara’s patented hangover cures on his next watch. “Woman... captain... oh mercy, mercy me,” he mumbled.

Perhaps it was Straker’s raw emotional state, but in a flash of insight, he recognized the young man’s dilemma. “*Mercy* indeed. She’s quite a

woman, isn't she?"

Something like horror belatedly came over Tomlinson's bleary face.

"Oh my God, sir, I—I—please don't say anything."

"You think she doesn't know already?"

"Holy shit. You think she does?"

"I think she's an exceptional captain and a smart woman, so it wouldn't surprise me. You know..." Straker rotated his bottle idly in the wet rings on the table. "I fell in love with my boss too, as a young man. My first crush, my first and last love, with all the insanity and intensity that goes with it."

"What happened?"

"I married her. Eventually. It was Carla—Admiral Engels—of course. When I first met her, she was an upperclassman at Academy and I was a new fourthie under her cadet command. Later, we worked together. I was Assault Captain Straker, mechsuit, and she was the lieutenant who flew my dropship. She outranked me too, by the way—remember, a full lieutenant in the Fleet was the same as a ground force assault-captain."

"So how did you handle it?"

Straker chuckled. "Badly. But my crush mellowed out to respect and comradeship... and came back around to love, I guess. It worked out, as you know."

"I don't think I have that kind of patience... and when she looks at me that way—like I disappointed her—it's a dagger in my guts."

"I know. But I think you did fine today. You stood up for what you believed, expressed your best assessment. She'll respect you more for that than for simple compliance. Within the bounds of military discipline, dissent is good. Once you get comfortable with that concept and realize disagreement doesn't mean opposition or betrayal, you'll be a better officer—and a better man."

"So you don't think she hates me now?"

"No. The most important thing you can do, young lieutenant, is to be the best man and the best officer you can. You can't *make* her interested in you, even if it was proper on this mission—which it isn't. The boss can't have affairs with those under her command. That'd be perceived as favoritism, which is a guaranteed discipline-wrecker. The smartest thing you can do is to be a man she'd want to be with. After we're home, you can be reassigned to another ship. Then you can express your interest freely."

Tomlinson poured himself another shot and stared at it, and then up at Straker. "I shouldn't drink this." He seemed to be asking permission.

Straker refused to give it. "That's on you, kid. You make your choices, and you accept the headaches. That's life." He drained his beer, stood, and set down the bottle with a *clunk*. "You got a friend around? Some comrades, some buddies?"

"Yeah. I mean, yes sir."

"Then here's my only order. Never drink alone."

"Aye aye, sir. Thank you, sir." Tomlinson stood as well, grabbed his bottle and his glass, and wobbled across the wardroom to a table-full of junior officers, laughing and joking.

"Now who can the commanding general drink with?" Straker said to himself. "Can't even follow my own gods-damned advice."

He returned to his quarters and tried not to worry about Carla. He checked his messages, and found that at least his children were doing fine back on Utopia.

Still, he missed his wife the most.

Chapter 16

Mechrono-7, tree city of The Living.

The Devil damn all men to Hell, Chiara Jilani thought as she stomped across the green toward the only repair hangar in the spaceport. Can't live with 'em, can't shoot 'em.

Well, now and then she could.

And had.

They were irritating. Hardly worth the trouble. Why couldn't they be more like women?

Unfortunately, she just couldn't stay away from them. They got under her skin.

Loco did, anyway.

She noticed two ratlings and one spider watching her. The rats did it routinely, no doubt reporting to their inevitable crimorg. The spider was more obvious, and focused on her ship alone. She had no doubt the Arattak had been working with the Korveni crimorg, and she'd done them many injuries over the years, so she wasn't surprised they watched her when they could. *Cassiel* was a distinctive ship, an old but stylish Proton Industries 510, commonly called a Five-Ten.

Maybe she should get a new one, a bigger, better ship, now that she was finally accumulating some wealth. The two million credits-worth of Erbaccia extract Loco'd persuaded Keller to part with was for the job, mostly—after all, her own people had worked hard for it—but the hundred-fifty kilos of rhodium they'd scored was hers by right, she figured, and that was worth millions. She hadn't had that much money in years. Hooking up with the Breakers and getting home to Paradiso made it possible for her to stop running from everything, and maybe start moving toward something good.

If she could figure out what that something good was.

Of course, a new ship would cost at least ten mil, more like twenty if she got a Proton 750 like she really wanted. Might even cost thirty mil, with all the mods. She could get a lot for thirty mil. A real hot-water shower-bath module, for one thing.

A girl could dream.

For now, though, she'd be happy to get *Cassie's* wing fixed.

Once she made a deal with the repair shop, using Breaker money of course, she walked toward the Halfer ghetto. Well, maybe ghetto was too strong a term, but only marginally. The jumble of two-or-three-story buildings looked like an odd slapdash village of prefabs in the middle of the strange parklike city. The narrow streets were muddy, the natural grass worn through to the underlying soil, and unpaved. Some had gravel laid down, but most were filthy, and she kept to the edges, hands on her weapons and wishing she had one of the badgers watching her back. She itched for a hit of Erb, but sternly repressed her craving. Not now. Have to keep the dose low. Keep it under control, girl.

Her needler came out as a female ratling with a tawny face stepped out of an alley and gestured toward her.

She approached warily.

“You are Jilani, yes?”

“Captain Jilani.”

“As you say,” the rat bowed. “I am Sliiki. I was told you would pay for certain... information.”

“Who told you this?”

“Fiss. He is my littermate.”

“Go on.”

“Not here. Follow me.”

Chiara followed warily, needler still in hand, her other fist grasping a flash-bang with a two-second deadman trigger. Sliiki led her to a low, narrow door and then into a warren of tunnels barely large enough for a human to pass.

“That’s far enough.”

Sliiki turned and gestured into a small side chamber with two stools and a small table, lit by a single bare permalight glued to the ceiling. “Here.”

Inside, Chiara squatted on a stool, holstering the needler but keeping the flash-bang unobtrusively ready. “Okay, what’s your info?”

“I have information on the location of those you seek.”

“Male or female?”

“Both.”

“I see—tell me about the males first.”

“My best information says they are indentured at an Arattak mine outside of the Living’s influence. Their recovery will be difficult especially

without the remainder of the details. Details that came at great expense to me...

“Well lucky for us, we already found and rescued the males.”

Sliiki covered her eyes with her delicate hands. “Oh, woe, woe, to have worked so hard to find both! Now you would cheat me on one of the potential transactions?”

Chiara snorted. “Tough luck. Where are the females?”

“For that, you must pay in advance.”

“Five hundred.”

“No... Five thousand.”

Chiara squinted at the creature suspiciously. “How detailed is your information?”

“Location, owners, and a route. Unfortunately, nothing on the defenses. I would offer it if I had it.”

“One thousand.”

“Four,” the rat girl said firmly.

“Two would be very difficult for me,” Chiara answered with equal finality.

The ratling sighed. “Shall we say three and it’s a bargain?”

“Let’s say two and a half.”

The rat thought about it for several seconds. Her eyes shifted from side to side, obviously attempting to come up with a way to force the price higher. At last, she breathed deeply. “Agreed.”

“I want hardcopy, in Earthan, and softcopy with none of your usual malware in it. My system can clear it, but it’s always a pain in the ass with you people.”

“You people? You insult our noble race?”

“Let’s just say I’ve never been wrong about your tendencies.”

Sliiki took out a packet and laid it on the tiny table. “And you humanoids are so moral? At least we Rodentia are not over-fond of genocide and war—and we do not abuse Contractors.”

“Nobody’s all bad—not even *you people*. Not even the Korven, though they come close.”

Sliiki shivered and bowed convulsively—as Contractors often were forced to. Then she held up her head high, defiantly. “I will not be stereotyped that way.”

Chiara jerked in surprise at the ratling’s slip. “You’re... ”

“I am an escaped Contractor—as are many of us. You might also turn to crime if the Conglomerate used its Regulations to oppress you for life. That’s why I want to deal fairly with you. You have a saying, yes? Honor among thieves.”

Her eyes narrowed again in suspicion. Rats were endlessly clever. Misrepresenting their background in order to gain a mark’s trust or get a discount wouldn’t be surprising. “Prove it.”

Sliiki reached beneath her tunic to extract a heavy pendant. She kissed it, removed it, and placed it on the table between them. “I swear on my Family Stone that I will treat you as a littermate, Chiara Francesca Jilani.”

“How do you know my full name?”

“Our sources of information are extensive. I know you recently distanced yourself from the Yellow Foot Mob. We would like to form a relationship with you.”

“Who, exactly?”

“We are the Daughters of Resistance. We seek the abolishment of all Contracts...by force if necessary. We know you’ve worked against the worst crimorgs before. You should be on our side.” Sliiki inclined her pointed head and twitched her whiskers. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

“If this is some scam or con...”

“It is *not*.”

Chiara let out a long breath. “Fine. We’ve agreed on a price. Let me see the information.”

“And the money?”

“I’m your littermate now, right? Do me the favor of letting me see it first.”

Sliiki slid the packet across. “Remember, favors go both ways.”

“We’ll see.” Chiara stashed the flash-bang, opened the packet and found a data stick and hardcopy. As she examined the hardcopy, her eyebrows rose. “I’m impressed.”

“The Arattak are not the best at intrusion countermeasures. We hacked their cruiser in orbit and downloaded all its data drives.”

Chiara reached into an inner pocket and extracted three kilo-credit currency wafers by fingertip feel alone and dropped them next to the pendant. “Three thousand. Quantum-locked, universal Conglomerate. Keep the change.”

“Many thanks.”

“But we’re even now. I don’t owe you any favors, got it?”

“Understood,” the ratling said. “But understand also, we are sincere. The Daughters could be of great help to you.”

“I don’t like to become entangled... at least with more than one organization at a time.”

“Ah. You became involved with something since your extraction from Yellow Foot?”

“Always fishing for information, huh?”

“It’s our stock-in-trade. We must fund our resistance activities, after all. It also helps avoid misunderstandings.”

Chiara eyed the ratling. “I’m with the Breakers now.”

Sliiki nodded. “Straker’s Breakers, the mercenaries who destroyed the Korveni.”

“Yeah.”

The ratling lowered her eyes. “I know them.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing negative, I assure you. We are happy to see scum like the Korveni wiped from the galaxy. Will the Breakers be opposing any other notable crimorgs?”

“Do the Arattak and Korven militaries count?”

“Only as high as twelve, I’m told.” Sliiki wheezed a chuckle at her own obscure joke. “The Breakers oppose the Axis of Predators?”

“Is that what they’re calling themselves?”

“You want more information from me?”

Chiara sighed. “All right. Let’s quit adding up credits and talk like... associates, at least. If that means I end up owing you a favor, so be it. But my first loyalty is to the Breakers.”

“Of course.”

“So tell me about this Axis of Predators.”

“It began as a rumor, but the Daughters believe there is truth in it. The Arattak, the Korven, the Dicon, the Crocs and the Vulps have formed an association. In the case of the Arattak and Korven, it has become a close alliance. With the others, it is in the nature of a nonaggression pact—an agreement to stay out of each others’ way, exchange information, sometimes combine operations. However, we expect their association to grow bolder with each success.”

“Why do you care?”

“We Rodentia are an underclass. We know this. It’s due to our resemblance to various pest species, especially those which developed on Old Earth, though we are genetically unrelated. It is convergent evolution that gave us this unfortunate appearance.” Sliiki ran her hands over her face and whiskers as if grooming. “Now, they call us *rats* with a sneer, and we are forced to live in the least desirable places, taking the dirtiest jobs. Is it surprising we turn to crime?”

Chiara snorted. “Poor me, society made me what I am. Seems like a half-truth to me.”

“A half-truth is still half true. Yet, the Daughters seek to be better than our circumstances—or our species’ tendencies. Isn’t that what good humans wish to do?”

Chiara shifted uncomfortably. “I’m struggling here, wanting to believe you. Against that I have long experience with you rats—sorry, Rodentia—trying to con me, steal from me, cheat me.”

Sliiki placed one fine-fingered paw atop Chiara’s callused, short-nailed hand. “Not this time.”

Chiara twitched her hand from under the paw and resisted the urge to wipe it on her tunic. The rats weren’t actually dirty or diseased. It was just... a feeling, hard to shake. “You didn’t answer my question. Why do you care about this Axis of Predators?”

“Because as small scavengers and omnivores, we are natural prey. Because few care about us, we are oppressed by the millions. We are sucked dry by Arattak and Dicon, forcibly implanted by Korven, eaten by the Crocs and the Vulps. Everyone seeks to put us under Contract, often signed at the point of a gun—but the Conglomerate doesn’t care about duress. They only care about the biometric signature.”

“I do know that...”

“What all of these predators have in common is this: they prey on sentient life. The Fugjios Conglomerate does it with laws and rules—dirty laws and rules to keep their own hands clean. By contrast, the Axis of Predators are not content to farm or herd or even hunt animals for their sport. They take joy in the domination, captivity, misery and death of sentients. They are the very definition of evil.”

“Yeah, that all sounds very noble, but it applies to everyone they prey on. Why do you single yourselves out particularly?”

“Because all the Predators are purging their societies of us. There are a few other oppressed and powerless species as well—including humanoids—but we Rodentia are universally despised. All of the Axis are doing this, and more regimes are using the activity as cover to persecute anyone they find inconvenient.”

“Really? I hadn’t heard of that last part.”

“They’ve forced Contracts upon millions. They are also buying the cheapest Contractors available. And many of these Contractors are vanishing... to somewhere.”

Chiara sat back, imagining. So it went far beyond the usual Predator activities—a rumored hunt here, a secret feast there. Now it was wholesale coercion and abduction. Give what the Predators did to prey... it probably amounted to mass murder, all under a veneer of legality—as far as the Conglomerate was willing to know.

The rest, they no doubt turned a blind eye to.

As she’d always worked to cause trouble for the crimorgs—mostly out of revenge and personal hatred for what they’d done to her as a child—she decided to think of the Axis of Predators as a crimorg syndicate, not a collection of militaristic legitimate governments.

Only, they were the biggest, most powerful crimorgs she’d ever thought of messing with. “You think you can stop them?”

Sliiki folded her hands. “We will do our part, spreading the word to those who can.”

“Ah. Now I get it. You’re trying to use the Breakers against the Predators. That’s why you’ve approached me.”

“We wish to *use* no one. We do seek to foster opposition. The Predators must be opposed, and the Conglomerate is content to let them run amuck, as long as business goes on. Business may even increase for a time under Axis rule, but it is the increase of cancer—a growth that will eventually kill.”

“You’re eloquent, even in Earthan.”

Sliiki bowed. “I have studied extensively.”

Chiara sighed. “Okay, I believe you. But that’s for another day. Right now, I need to get six Breakers back. If you really want me to trust you, you’ll help me.”

“All we can, yes. We are not soldiers, so we cannot be seen to take direct action, but we will give you what we know.”

Chiara returned her attention to the hardcopy. “If this is true, we need to move fast.”

“It *is* true. It may already be too late.”

Chiara shivered. “Not if I can help it.”

“On the data stick you will find more details. It’s all we have.”

For one long moment Chiara thought about trust—about the long con, about being a sucker, about how people fooled themselves when they saw what they wanted to see. Could this be happening now? The rats were inveterate liars and cheats. But, her gut said this one was playing straight.

“Okay. I’ll take action. Keep in mind, though, I’ll be taking out an insurance policy. If this is some kind of scam or put-up job, I’ll hunt you and yours down and make you pay—or my friends will. Like I made the Korveni pay. Understand?”

“I understand... and I hope we can earn your trust, someday.” Sliiki placed the pendant around her neck again and the currency wafers into a pocket.

Chiara snapped her fingers. “I also need some things for the trip—a stand-alone carbon dioxide scrubber, a space-capable toilet pod, five hundred human-edible self-heating meals, a six-gig oxygen synthesizer, a thousand liters of bottled water, twenty bedrolls... as well as getting my repairs expedited. If you can get me all that and deliver it to the ship ASAP, I’ll pay with currency or trade goods.”

“Money in advance would help...”

Chiara dipped into her tunic and took out the other seven kilo-credit wafers she had handy. “All I have on me.”

“It will do.”

It occurred to her that she might as well think big with Breaker money. “Also... my ship could use some extra defenses. Shields, reinforcement busses...”

“Would it surprise you to learn that surplus shield modules are easy to come by, as they’re useless here in the Mechrono system? I believe one could be obtained and fitted. However, make sure you don’t activate it until you’re outside the flatspace limit!”

“Of course. Get moving on this, with my thanks.”

“Gladly.” Sliiki led her out of the building.

Chiara found the flophouse where the men were staying. Before she went in, in a shadowed doorway in a back alley, she took out the tiny

dispenser tube of Erb and touched it to her tongue. Relief flooded her as the extract hit her system and soothed her jangled nerves. She wished she could do more, to let the nectar carry her to paradise for a blessed hour or two, but she was on a mission. No time for pleasure binges. Sex would have to fill the void, later—pun intended.

At the flophouse she gathered up the rescued Breakers and the badgers, and led them back to the ship. By the time she arrived, rats had begun to deliver the items she'd asked for and the repair shop was busily fixing the ship's damaged wing. The shield module and its emitters sat nearby, waiting to be bolted on—a surprisingly advanced Langston 2013.

"Chief," she said to Sylvester, "We're going to have to make do, packing the ship full. Life will be miserable and tight for a while. Either that, or we leave some of your people here and send a ship to pick them up later."

Sylvester chewed a lip. "We won't split up. Not this crew. We want to help get the others back. We'll be fine. We're spacers. We're used to living tight. Don't leave any of us behind, Captain."

Chiara slapped his shoulder. "Deal. I'll drop the ramp and you guys unload the cargo hold. Take everything out. Some of it's going to be traded for our new equipment. The rest, re-stow so you all can bunk there."

"Aye aye, ma'am."

The spacers quickly moved everything out of the hold and onto the grass, while Brock and Raj patrolled the area, checking the deliveries in and out. Normally she'd worry about the rats filching anything portable, but they seemed to have suspended their usual thieving for now. She supervised the repairs and upgrades, the trades and the re-stowing, getting rid of everything she could spare in exchange for Conglomerate credit, especially the heavy rhodium. If not for the rescue mission, she'd call this a highly successful trading run.

If they survived.

Six hours later, she launched *Cassiel* from the spaceport and flew low over the landscape, testing out the new wing and flight controls. When she was satisfied, she pushed the throttles forward, went supersonic and tilted the ship's nose upward, passing through several Mach numbers before she ran out of atmosphere.

"I see you timed the departure with the orbiting Arattak ship on the other side of the planet," Loco said from the copilot's seat. He was looking

much better after resting and letting the Bug heal him—not to mention his male pride, acting as if he were completely fine.

“Yep,” she said. “But we have to assume they have a drone or two keeping watch on the ship that ruined their rhodium operation.”

“So you think they’re watching?” Loco asked.

“Wouldn’t you be?”

“Guess so...”

An alarm beeped until Chiara acknowledged it with the tap of a control. “Speak of the Devil... Here we go.”

The display showed the Arattak ship rounding the planet under full acceleration and launching missiles.

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Chapter 17

Hellheim Nebula, SBS *Trollheim*, aft cargo airlock.

Straker pressed his face against the transparent duralloy of the cargo control room looking into the capacious airlock. That airlock was big enough to transfer the largest items in deep space without wasting oxygen—more than thirty meters by thirty. For anything bigger, the cargo bay itself would have to be evacuated of air.

Inside the room, he could see Roentgen's cargo module, a battered, windowless crysteel cuboid three meters by three by six. He noticed peeling paint overlaid with illegible graffiti and wondered idly how far that container had come. It had been manufactured decades ago in the Hundred Worlds, travelling from planet to planet filled with goods, only to end up here and now, so far from its origin.

His chrono told him Roentgen—the Roentgens—should emerge any time now. The viewport should protect Straker from the majority of radiation, and he'd get his first true view of a Thorian outside his suit. Of course, he'd seen them during the fusing, but as other Thorians saw each other. This time, he'd see one with his human eyes.

The door swung open. The suited Roentgen stepped out and paused. Had he been human, he'd have looked around and perhaps nodded in satisfaction, but the Thorian was still as ice. His "vision" needing no aiming—it functioned 360 degrees in all three dimensions.

After a moment, he stepped out of the way and another Thorian emerged, unsuited. It—Straker already was differentiating the two by calling the suited one "he," the departing one "it," perhaps to make the parting easier—it was somewhat octopoid. Unlike a Ruxin, however, it had four stubby legs with four symmetrical toes, like split hooves, attached to a distinctly cylindrical torso, with barely the hint of a waist. It had four slimmer arms with hands, with the evenly spaced fingers he'd seen once before.

By its movements, it had no bones, nor exoskeleton. When he'd clasped hands in the fusing, before his nerves went dead, he'd had the impression of drying clay, still slightly malleable before setting firmly. Its surface was grayish-brown, like a glistening, polished metallic granite, or some kind of exotic mineral. There were no eyes, noses, mouths or other orifices. It might

have been a machine, a Lithomorphic robot made of solidified soil, by all indications. Yet it was alive, in its own way, and sentient.

What really was the difference between an intelligent machine and a living creature? Weren't humans—and most aliens—nothing but organic machines of astonishing complexity? Thorians—and the Crystals Straker had defeated—straddled the line between the two. Inorganic, azoic life forms. If this wasn't evidence of some Unknowable Creator, he didn't know what was.

"So, what's the plan for R-1?" Straker asked Zaxby, who occupied the control station behind him.

"I take your designation to mean the Roentgen on his way out?"

"Yeah."

"The plan is simple. I will implement it now." As he spoke, the outer doors drew aside, opening the airlock to space.

Straker could see the glow of the drive spewing reaction mass into space in its fine, high-energy plasma. "Will the drive plume harm R-1?"

"Not in the least. It'll be like a human skydiving into a blast of warm engine exhaust."

As if on cue, R-1 walked to the edge, its motion demonstrating that the gravity inside the airlock had been turned down to minimum. Without pausing, it fell forward, flexed its legs and shoved off the edge like a diver. When it hit the plume, it spun and vanished in the glow astern.

Straker belatedly raised a palm in a farewell gesture, feeling gut-punched all over again.

The Roentgen still in the airlock—R-2, should he say?—also raised his hand, whether in farewell, or in imitation of Straker, he didn't know. He held it up until the outer doors closed and the inner doors opened to allow him inside.

The Thorian met Straker in the cargo bay. "I am here."

"Yeah, me too." Straker stared. "You're the same person, but you're not, either. I saw another one of you just... leap into space."

"This is true. I am also about to fuse with the vortex. I eagerly anticipate the experience."

"You're in communication with... it? With Roentgen-1?"

"I am, imperfectly, through particle exchange. There is distance and interference. As you would yell across a chasm." He paused. "It is

occurring. It is wonderful. I am ecstatic.” The flat, translated voice contrasted oddly with the emotional words.

“Keep talking. Tell me about it.”

“I can’t. It is gone.”

Straker’s heart clenched. “Dead?”

“I don’t know. I felt the fusing, and then dissolution. My sibling may have been incorporated into the vortex, but this is not death. Not for our kind.”

Straker shook his head. “I can’t comprehend that. I can only see you, here with me, and... and focus on the present.” He looked away, looked around at nothing, thinking about endings, and Carla, and his own golem-clone he’d condemned to death.

Zaxby was running decontamination on the cargo module, still in the airlock, and so he and Roentgen were still alone in the cargo bay.

“I wish we could share a drink at the bar,” Straker said.

“Is that anything like fusing?” the Roentgen asked.

“A little.”

“I can safely ingest various substances through my suit.”

“I thought you didn’t eat or drink.”

“As with many truths, that is not entirely accurate. We do require trace amounts of certain isotopes in order to maintain our bodies. To achieve this, we’re able to ingest large amounts of material, filter out what we need, and excrete that which is not needed. Therefore, I am able to have a drink with you, though your drinks will not have an intoxicating effect.”

“Is there anything that *does* intoxicate your species?”

“Some exotic isotopes,” the Roentgen said, “especially those with short, intense half-lives. These are the equivalent of drugs to us. Some Thorians ingest too much of these, becoming addicted and useless. Some fall into a life of misbehavior to support their habits.”

Straker snorted. “Ha. Radiation-addicted Thorians! That didn’t even occur to me.”

“Every species has its problems, similar to, but different from yours.”

“Okay, then. Let’s go get a drink and you can tell me all about them.”

“I would relish that.”

Straker put in his comlink. “Zaxby, do you think you could concoct a pleasant, safe, mildly radioactive drink for Roentgen?”

“Of course. I’ve studied Thorian nutritional requirements quite extensively.”

“Then come join us at the wardroom bar. We’ll have ourselves a wake for R-1.”

Straker felt the entire wardroom watching the trio and trying not to be obvious about it. Their commander; the flamboyant senior Ruxin—and the weird new alien who never left his suit. They took a table off to the side.

Zaxby set a thermal container in front of Roentgen and ordered sea-beer for himself. Straker called for a Sachsen brew, always the best. Frankly, he’d rather have Scotch right now, but he’d grown accustomed to the good stuff in his quarters. Hard liquor from the wardroom was synthesized, mediocre, and it was tough to go back to it. Yet he was in the mood to tie one on, so he ordered a double shot of synthesized Irish whisky and dropped it into his liter of beer as a boilermaker.

“To absent friends.” Straker raised his stein.

“Absent friends,” Zaxby murmured.

Straker drained half the mixture, feeling the stuff hit his empty stomach like a bomb, and called for another setup. Mara approached with a petite glass of Utopian chianti, and he nodded her to an empty seat.

“May they return one day,” Roentgen added. He sipped at his container from its integrated straw-tube, which fitted into his suit’s ingestion port, near what a human would call his chest. “This is decidedly awful,” he announced.

Zaxby mimed hurt. “I made sure it’s safe and appropriate—a replication of one of your standard drinks.”

“I don’t doubt its safety and effect, but it still tastes disgusting. However, it will dull my senses soon, so I will no longer care, and it is comradely to sit and ingest intoxicants with friends.”

“Yes, it is,” Straker echoed. “Lots of intoxicants.” He polished off another double boilermaker and waved for more.

Mercy Salishan, tunic collar unbuttoned and bottle in hand, put her other palm on an empty chair’s back. “May I join you?” she asked.

“Certainly, Captain,” Mara said, standing up. Her head barely reached Salishan’s shoulder, which she slapped lightly with the back of her fingers. “What you got there, woman?”

“Real Canadian whisky, all the way from Old Earth. If I’m going to drink, I’m going to do it right.”

“Of course, of course, sit down, Mercy.” Straker slid sideways to give her and Mara room. A steward set a tray of snacks discreetly onto the table, along with more shot glasses, a liter of the fake Irish whisky, and several more cold beers.

“I presume this is a wake of sorts?” Salishan said as she turned her chair around and sat with her elbows on its back.

“News travels fast,” Straker replied. A floating feeling had firmly taken hold, telling him the alcohol was occupying his brain like a Korven raiding party.

“A ship is a tight-knit village. There are no secrets, especially about heroics. About legends...” Salishan poured careful shots of her vintage whiskey and slid them to the humans.

Mara sipped hers and held it in her mouth for a moment before swallowing with an expression of intense satisfaction. “That’s *good*. It justifies the damning hangover to come.”

“It’d better be good. It’s older than I am, and I ain’t that young.”

“Heroics.” Straker slugged his shot back, feeling the smooth burn all the way down. “R-1 was a hero. I salute him.” He said this with a tinge of irony and sarcasm. He wasn’t entirely sure why. The five—seven—eight or nine?—drinks he’d had were coloring his mood. He didn’t often let himself get drunk this way, even less often in public, but today it seemed right.

“The vortex is gone,” Salishan said sharply. “At least, it’s backed far off and seems to be watching us from a safe distance. That makes him a hero in my book. What else is heroism but keeping the wolf from the door?”

Straker growled and stared at nothing across the room. “It’s killing the fucking wolf and taking back those he kidnapped. But he keeps getting away...”

“We’ll catch him,” Mara replied. That made a weird kind of sense, but it didn’t matter. On his empty stomach, the alcohol was pleasantly overloading his bloodstream.

For long minutes he floated, while people talked around him, words drifting by like birds on the wing. Carla... Carla...

Abruptly his mood turned dark. He swept glasses, drinks and beer onto the floor with a crash. Salishan barely saved her bottle. Conversation in the room died as people stared. “I can’t *find* her,” he said unsteadily, and slammed a fist onto the plastic table, which cracked.

Mara grabbed his elbow. “Okay, big brother, I think it’s time to take this party somewhere private.” Straker felt himself lifted and guided to his feet, somebody on each side of him, to stumble along a passageway and into his quarters.

“Carla,” he croaked again as he was guided to sit on his bunk. “I can’t find her. We’re chasing ghosts. No solid data.”

“We’ll find her,” Mara said, holding his hand. “That’s what we’re all here for.”

“I shoulda never let her go... ”

“She’s a big girl. We’re all grownups. That’s life, and shit happens.”

“Shit happens.” He put his head back and closed his eyes, feeling the room tilt. “Something’s wrong with the grav... ”

“No, you just haven’t been this drunk in a while.”

“Set a... bad ’zample. Fer the troopsh. The crew.”

He felt his sister snuggle, holding his arm and placing her head on his shoulder. “Naw. Just makes you more human to them. Everyone knows about the Roentgens, how you fused, and how one of them sacrificed himself for the ship. You guys kept the wolf at bay. They appreciate it. They’re in awe of you. One more thing to add to your legend.”

“Thanksh. You know all that stuff I said... ”

“What stuff?”

“When I was a kid. About you being a pest... ”

“I was a pest. Now I’m the best. So what? We’re family. Like Zaxby, and Carla, and every Breaker. And now Roentgen. It’s tough to lose family.”

“Can’t lose. I must... always... find them... ” He faded, faded, feeling Mara pull his shoes off and tip him horizontal. A pillow appeared under his head, and a blanket settled over his shoulders.

That was the last he remembered for some time.

* * *

Mara Straker locked Derek’s door, confident he’d be fine. The Breaker Bug was proof against all ordinary accidents, such as a drunken slip in the shower, and as much as she loved him, she didn’t want to be his mother. He already had enough mommy issues. It’s what boys did when they lost their mothers young—they tried to fit every woman in their lives into that role.

It's why he fell in love with Carla, his beautiful, powerful boss, and subtly deferred to other strong women, and he didn't even notice it.

But that was fine. It wasn't even a male-female issue—it was just how life worked out. She didn't think women were inherently superior, but the ones who rose to the top sure were. Derek was a good and a great man, and in another life, if they hadn't been raised together, hadn't been sold the lie that they were brother and sister instead of both adopted and unrelated, she might have been his Carla.

In fact, he was such a great man, she had to protect him at all costs—mostly from himself. Great men were seldom brought down by external forces. They seeded their own destruction from within. Every Achilles had a weak heel somewhere. The ones who maintained their greatness surrounded themselves with trusted friends and family, and didn't let that greatness go to their heads.

And oftentimes, those friends and family had to shield the great man from himself, without his knowledge or approval.

She found Zaxby alone in his lab, which just happened to be one deck directly above her own infirmary and the med-lab she'd set up. It made things quite convenient, especially when she'd unlocked an access hatch between the two spaces, and installed a ladder.

"How's our Derek Straker?" he asked as he worked on an obscure device clamped to his workbench—some kind of scanner, it looked like.

"He's fine. The drinking was a little surprising, but not entirely out of character. Healthy enough, I'd say. He's had a few shocks lately, and not enough fights to keep him focused."

"He does need something to fight. It allows him to compartmentalize. Also, without either Loco or Carla in his orbit, he's adjusting to a different support system—you, me, Mercy, Roentgen. I, in fact, am his most constant companion. I'll keep him sane."

"Rah, rah, go Zaxby. Do you think he'll hold up?"

"I think he will, as long as he needs to. Each experiment teaches us."

Mara sat across from Zaxby, put her elbows on the cluttered workbench, and sighed. "Do you ever have doubts? I mean really?"

"Of course I have doubts. It would be irrational not to. I pride myself on cold-eyed rationality rather than the emotionalism to which most of you humans seem prone. Utter certainty is anathema to the truly scientific mind. One must always have doubts in order to recognize new truths."

“Yeah, but you’re retreating into weak self-justification. I mean doubts about what we’re doing, and what it means when he finds out.”

“Of course. But Derek Straker has endured several fundamental shifts in his understanding of reality in his life. That the Hok menace were not aliens at all, but an inimical human regime. Finding out you and his parents were alive. That he’d been lied to all his life. That part of his life had been lived in a shared VR matrix, and that his brainchips routinely altered his view of the world based on government network overlays. Once he broke free of those illusions, he found out aliens had been infiltrating and manipulating humanity for decades, possibly centuries.”

“Yeah... he handled it all pretty well, but this... this is likely to be a lot more personal.”

Zaxby put down a tool, picked up another. “I have confidence. Look at how he adjusted to Terra Nova. He refused to label all humanopts as evil. He held fast to the high moral principle that people should be judged by their merits, their character and their actions, not their origins or external characteristics. He was able to make peace with bitter enemies. In fact, he was too high-minded, too willing to forgive—but that bodes well in this case. I believe he will adjust to this new paradigm when the time comes. In fact, I can’t think of anyone else more fit for this experiment.”

Mara stood and drifted toward the wall panel. “Yes. The stakes are too high to do otherwise. It took Carla’s kidnapping to make it obvious, and it forced our hand. It was only ever supposed to be a contingency option.”

“Now who’s retreating into weak self-justification?”

“I know. And Zaxby... if I didn’t say so before, I’ll say so now. The Thorian fusing idea was a master stroke.”

“I have my moments.”

“It opened Derek’s mind to the concept of fission being natural and good, resulting in two identical beings. At least, identical to begin with. Later, the beings diverge and become individuals, of course, but he needs to get well-and-truly accustomed to the *idea*, before he has to deal with the *reality*.” She placed her palm on the panel and it slid out of the way, revealing a hidden room.

Inside, rows of rejuvenation tanks hummed softly, glowing.

Chapter 18

Mechrono-7, aboard *Cassiel*.

Loco flipped up the chaff-and-flare dispenser's cover and readied his finger over the button. The count showed 24 of the reloaded pods. He leaned over and opened the control on the blinding module as well. Mechron hadn't destroyed them the first time due to its use, so hopefully the strange machine wouldn't care this time.

"Thank God for orbital mechanics," Chiara muttered from the pilot's seat as she tweaked the ship's outbound trajectory.

"What do you mean?"

"Rounding a planet isn't like dodging an asteroid. Gravity, atmosphere, and orbital momentum... they're in the worst possible position I could put them in, vector-wise. It'll take them twenty minutes to get lined up and start pursuing, and Mechron keeps them from using beams. Railguns have zero hit probability against a small maneuvering ship like *Cassiel*. But that leaves... "

"Missiles." Loco checked the plots on the display. "Damn, those are nuclear shipkillers. They aren't interested in disabling and capturing us anymore, I see."

"I think they're willing to forgo sucking out our brains. We've made so much trouble, they just want us dead."

Loco stuck in his comlink. "Raj, you on the tail gun?"

"Roger, sir. I see the two inbounds."

"What do you think?"

"Two minutes forty seconds to impact. That's two minutes and twenty seconds until I have even a small chance of a hit with this archaic twenty-millimeter. I think we're in big trouble unless I can use the point defense laser."

Loco grunted. "Only if it's absolutely, one hundred percent do-or-die. Mechron destroys every weaponized laser that gets used, as far as we know—and some more innocuous ones. I've got the chaff dispenser, and the blinding module just in case."

"One small point of good news, sir—the shipkillers are sluggish. They're either low-tech versions, or they have some features shut off—

impeller vectoring, for example. If we're lucky, their terminal guidance and fusing will be substandard as well."

"Luck ain't a plan, but thanks. Loco out."

The ship rumbled with maximum fusion engine power—over maximum, Loco saw as the plenum temperature rose into the red. He wasn't the savviest pilot, but he knew Chiara was trying to give Raj as much time as possible before the shipkillers overtook them, stretching out the engagement.

"What else you got in your bag of tricks?" he asked.

"Not much. No asteroids, and the moon is out of position for a skim-by. No help, no allies... not unless Mechron intervenes."

"How do we get him to do that?"

"In the next two minutes? No idea."

"Do you have any missiles or probes? Drones?"

"No missiles. One Keymark 900."

"Which is?"

"Commercial observation and relay drone. Size of a volleyball, but it uses impellers, so Mechron will destroy it as soon as it maneuvers."

An idea tickled Loco's brain. "Where's the launcher?"

"Dorsal. Oh, you mean on the console?" Chiara did something, and an application popped up on one of his displays. "Configure, launch and control."

"Right. Do you have a brainlink port you haven't mentioned?"

"You kidding?"

"Just asking." Loco activated his brainlink anyway and put it into forced diagnostic mode. Immediately, the expected headache manifested as his chipset vainly tried to connect with a nonexistent suit. The side effect of this, though, was a time sense boost of about triple, a cheap-and-dirty way to make two minutes into six. It was an unauthorized emergency technique known to every mechsuirer.

It took him about four minutes in his head to figure out the application and do the work, leaving forty actual seconds on the clock.

Fortunately, the cheap commercial drone used standardized control protocols. He quickly configured it for direct radio control and telemetry and set the launcher for pneumatic ejection, zero thrust. The sphere would puff gently out into space, and then be left behind as *Cassiel* continued to accelerate.

But would it survive passing through the fusion exhaust?

“Chi, when I tell you, cut thrust to minimum.”

“Why?”

“Trust me.”

“Okay. I can cut it entirely... ”

“No, I need you to leave the drone behind, and I need it to end up in our wake... right where the missiles will overrun it.”

“For what? It’s not a space mine, and they won’t target it.”

“Impeller.”

Understanding dawned on Chiara’s face. “Might work.” She throttled down and rotated the ship so the dorsal launcher was facing directly aft. “Set it to max thrust launch and go, now!”

“Uh, sir... ” Raj comlinked, but Loco ignored him as he changed his intentions once again, ran the launch thrust up to max, and fired the drone.

Chiara immediately shoved the throttles to the stops, and piloted the ship in a looping curve back on course.

Loco was worried for a moment, until he saw what she’d done. The high-velocity pneumatic drone launch had sent the little plastic ball backward, and the high-speed ship thrust was directed out of its way until there was enough separation not to matter. Now, her course brought the enemy missiles, the drone, and the ship all back into a precise line. He felt the firing of the tail gun as its hammering vibration was transmitted through the hull.

“We lost about ten seconds doing that, so it better be worth it,” Chiara snarled as she gripped the controls.

Loco didn’t answer, concentrating on the timing of his next instruction to the drone. He factored in control lag, transmission lag, control lag on the other end, and a guess at how quickly a bubble would show up.

He sent the instruction.

Three seconds before the first missile overran the Keymark 900, the drone activated its impeller and all its transmitters, aiming directly at the missiles.

“Three... two... one... ” Loco counted.

Just as the missile reached the drone, a bubble appeared as if by magic. In the vacuum of space, it could move at unbelievable speeds—half lightspeed, by all reports, too fast to see its approach except as a faint streak of superheated hydrogen atoms.

“Come on, come on,” Loco chanted.

Now, how discriminating would the bubble be?

The drone and the missile, within meters of each other, both disappeared in a combined flash of vaporized plasma. As he’d hoped, the drone’s impeller had attracted the bubble, which had destroyed the offending machinery and the missile with it.

Then the bubble was gone.

“It worked!” Loco crowed. “One down.”

“Good job... but it ain’t over.”

The second missile, unaffected, flew through the expanding gas and reacquired *Cassiel* with its radar. Raj’s tail gun hammered at it, tracers visible as they reached in a long stream for the shipkiller. The weapon corkscrewed in response, slowing its overtaking, but avoiding destruction. Loco could hear the badger cursing in his own language in a low, sustained monotone as he fought to put the bullets onto the nose of their impending death.

“Ten seconds,” Chiara said. “Chaff and flares.”

Loco started punching the button in threes and fours, but the missile ignored the distractions.

“Five seconds. Blinding pod!”

Loco took a deep breath and mashed his finger on the control. The missile drifted off course in a smooth curve, led astray by the countermeasures—and then the displays whited. He waited for a shockwave, but even nuclear weapons had surprisingly small blast radii in vacuum, with no medium to transmit the energy.

“Its proximity fuse triggered—too far away,” Chiara said with a relieved sigh. She throttled back to fifty percent power and checked her displays.

“We’re out of range, and they can’t catch us now. We’ll make it to flatspace.” She reached under her seat for a flask and took several swallows, and then handed it over to Loco without looking at him.

He downed a slug of what turned out to be something peppery and alcoholic, noticing Chiara shoving shaking hands into her armpits. “You okay?”

“I’m fine, fine. Just adrenaline. You got the ship.” She stood up, reaching into her tunic as she turned toward the door.

The cockpit door opened and Belinda peeked in brightly. “Can I get you anything?”

Loco waved a *no*, his mind still on the tactical situation.

As Chiara squeezed past her and out, Belinda stepped inside and shut the door. She put her butt on the pilot's seat and began to stare at Loco.

He tried to keep his mind on his work, and he avoided looking at her—but it was difficult.

“You all right?” she asked.

“More or less. Just trying to figure some stuff out.”

“Stuff?”

“Things...”

“About Chiara?”

He turned to face her at last. “You have no filters, do you?”

“Of course I do,” she said this with no trace of bitterness. “But I know a lot about relationships. In theory, anyway. In practice... I know it's hard.”

“I never thought of myself as straitjacketed or controlled by my upbringing...” Loco said, “but I'm having trouble adjusting to...”

“To the Middle Reach? Chi told me about human space. About your law-and-order Republic, and your wars. It must have been weird and exciting.”

“That's one way to put it.”

“And no Contractors!”

“Not exactly, but there's oppression, underclasses. Gods and monsters, none of it's like here, though. It pisses me off. I want to bring fleets and mechsuits and smash these crimorgs and governments that turn a blind eye to all this exploitation, and those that profit from it. Nobody should be treated the way you and Chiara were treated. Or your brother.” He reached across to hold her hand.

“Thank you. You're so kind.” She squeezed his hand.

Loco resisted reacting. She reminded him a little of the Tachina clones, the way they had of making your head swim...

“Wait a minute,” he said. “Belinda, are you using pheromones or anything like that?”

“I don't know what you mean.”

“Some special perfumes or products that make people like you better?”

“No. But Chiara let me use some of her makeup.”

“What about... does your body make anything like that naturally?”

“I don't know.”

“Were you... captured when you were young, like Chiara? Or were you...?”

“Bred for the job?” Belinda asked. “I really don’t know. They never told me. I asked, of course, but Contract work was all I ever knew. Then my Contract was sold. Fortunately, Lutan didn’t want to abuse me or Brandon. We were just... decorations. I guess we were lucky. Eventually we’d have been implanted, probably many times.”

“I’m really glad you got away... and again, I’m sorry about your brother.”

“Me, too. But... it’s okay. The Breakers are like my brothers now. They said they adopted me.”

“Really?” A suspicion tickled Loco’s mind. Lonely spacers... a beautiful young Contractor, naive and unaccustomed to normal human society... all packed together on a tiny ship. Not good for discipline, and not good for the one young woman.

Loco let out a long breath. “Look, I know Chiara’s the captain here—”

“—and you’re First Lieutenant Paloco.”

“Right. Guess I am. Then even though you’re free, as a part of this crew, you have to follow my orders.”

“Of course, Loco,” she said, brightening a little.

“Good,” he said. “Then hereby I order you not to flirt with or be affectionate with the Breaker men we rescued. Not until this mission is completely over and we’re safe at home. Then you can do what you want, as a civilian—but not now. Be polite and helpful, but no making out, no sex, nothing like that.”

She looked startled, but not upset. “Aye aye, First Lieutenant Paloco. But... can I ask why? I like them.”

“Because... because in our culture, sex is more complicated.”

“I’m very well trained in its complications.”

“No, not the act. I mean, the emotional and practical implications of sex. In close quarters like this, it could get ugly. You could cause jealousy, possessiveness, competition, fighting... At the very least, it could strain discipline in our very tight space. Understand?” It amused him to hear himself giving a Straker-style speech, but he couldn’t stop.

“No,” she said, “but I trust you’re in command, Loco. Chiara says you’re the best at what you do.”

“Ha, no, that would be a guy named Derek Straker.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Loco. I can’t imagine a better Manager... First Lieutenant, I mean. This Derek Straker—is he a better lover?”

“You sure ask weird questions.”

“Is he?” she insisted.

“I have no idea.”

“Is he a better conversationalist? Is he kinder, smarter, funnier, better looking?”

“Um... not really.”

“Then why do you say he’s the best?”

Loco sighed. “Because I’ve always looked up to him. He’s like my big brother.”

“I looked up to my big brother too, but I was better than he was at some things.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. How is it you’re so smart?”

“Because I’m looking at you from the outside. And you’re looking at me from the outside, so you think to wonder things like whether I have pheromones, or what would happen if I was affectionate with the Breakers. Things I haven’t even thought about. Everybody has their skills, Loco. One of my mothers used to say that there’s no point in complaining that fish can’t climb trees. If you want to climb a tree, find a monkey. Let a fish be a fish in the sea.”

“Gods—you’re going to make somebody very happy someday.”

Belinda took his hand. “But not you.”

“I’m with Chiara.”

“You love her?”

“I—might.”

She smiled. “And romantic love is exclusive and monogamous in your culture?”

“Uh...” Loco pulled his hand from hers, gently. “The ideal love is, I guess. That’s the message we get from most sources. Find your one true love, and then stick with it.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that right now.”

“What do you mean?”

An odd look crossed Belinda’s face, something hard to interpret. “She has a bigger love in her life than you, Loco.”

He stared, astonished. “Who is it?”

Belinda stood, suddenly nervous. “It’s not my place to say. I have to go.”

“Belinda—?”

She shut the door behind her, and Loco turned back to stare at the console.

He was still staring at it when Chiara returned to the cockpit. She made a significant course change of nearly twenty degrees, but they were still outbound toward flatspace.

“What’s that course change about?” he asked.

“My usual practice. Since we’re on the inside of the rough sphere of curved space, if we change course, anyone lurking out there trying to ambush us has to move laterally to do it—and the sooner I change course, the farther they’d have to move, and the harder it is to remain stealthy. In another hour I’ll change again. Bring predictable gets you killed.”

“Or... gets you hurt?”

Chiara turned to face him, lifting her feet to fold them under her muscular thighs. “Look, I’m sorry if I’m not exactly who you want me to be all the time. I’m sorry I’m not perfect. I’m sorry if I have walls and armor. I can only be who I am.”

“It’s not about who *you* are. It’s how you treat me, what you’re not telling me.”

“What am I not telling you?”

Loco shrugged helplessly. “I keep finding out things that you’ve withheld, so how do I know?”

“I don’t owe you complete... what’s the word?”

“Forthrightness?” he suggested.

“Disclosure. It’s not dishonest to keep my own confidences—and those of others who trust me.”

Loco was going to say something about the bigger love Belinda had mentioned, but suddenly thought better of it. Instead, he stuck with an argument he was sure he could win. “What’s confidential about your ship’s capabilities, or your cargo, or your intentions on this mission? I’m part of your crew now, so I really do need to know everything.”

Chiara let out a long breath, perhaps in relief, perhaps in belated agreement. “Yeah, okay, you’re right about that one. Let’s go over all the ship’s systems, starting now. We can keep working in sidespace. Not much else to do.”

“Good, good.” Loco took his victory and sat on it, so to speak, spending the next hours in a thorough overview of the *Cassiel*, her modifications, her capabilities, her quirks and tendencies, her weaknesses.

“Hey, what’s *Cassiel* named after, anyway?”

Chiara cleared her throat, and her face took on a coldness he hadn’t seen before. “Cassiel is the name of an archangel. It means *God Is My Anger*. He’s the angel of tears. He presides over the death of kings. He is terrible, implacable, and vengeful.”

“Wow. That’s a lot in a name.”

“She’s worthy of it,” Chiara assured him.

“Are we talking about the ship, or you?”

“I dunno, Loco. You tell me.”

“Come on, Chi. Don’t be that way. I care about you.”

She sighed. “I know you do. I care about you too.”

“But I’m not your top priority.”

“Am I yours?”

It had been a retort, but Loco considered, trying to give a serious, straight answer. “In the long run, you could be—if you want. In the short run, getting the other Breakers back has to be. You know that.”

“Exactly my point. Right now, my priorities include this ship, our lives, the Breakers on the ship, the Breakers we’re trying to find, our people back on Utopia—damn it!” She lifted her hands to yank on her cascade of raven hair. “I don’t have any headspace for this other shit right now.”

“Shit like us?”

“Don’t take offense where I don’t mean any. You know what I’m saying. Stuff, mess, complexity.”

“I always found a good relationship made things less complex.”

“And who the hell are you to talk about good relationships?”

He smiled bleakly. “I have a good one with the mother of my son Derek, even if it’s not passionate anymore. And I know one when I see it. Like Straker and Carla. They fight, but they’re always solid. They’re *more* effective for it, not less.”

“Don’t push me on this, Loco. We’re compatible. I love the sex. You’re fun to have around. The rest is distracting, and distractions can get us killed. Can we put all the relationship *stuff* on pause for now and focus on the mission? Please, Lieutenant Paloco?”

“Aye aye, Captain Jilani. Or should I call you Francesca?”

Chiara blushed. “Where’d you get that name?”

“Going through the ship’s files. Seems too formal, though. How about... Frankie?”

“Now you’re just getting me back for calling you Mikey.”

He grinned. “Yup. If you wanna dish it out, you gotta be able to take it.”

“I can take it. In fact, I’d like to take a break in bed... as soon as we’re safe in sidespace.”

Loco checked the chrono. “Thirteen minutes.”

“Get Raj back on the tail gun.” Chiara made one last course change. “As soon as we cross into flatspace, we activate everything—sensors, point defenses, the whole ball of yarn. No need for stealth at this point. Not that Cassie is truly stealthy—just low-profile.”

When the countdown hit zero, the two powered up all systems, especially the multiphasic sensors. “Nothing,” Loco said.

“Good. We’re almost safe.”

“Almost?”

“Remember, *Hercules* got ambushed coming out of sidespace. We can’t be sure somebody hasn’t developed some kind of tech to figure out where we transit in. I’m going to arrive far, far out in flatspace and make a couple of random jumps inward. It’ll use more fuel, but it’s all I know to do.”

“Won’t they see us coming?”

“Yeah. But better than getting killed. And the area where we’re arriving has a lot of traffic, a lot of comings and goings.”

Loco fixed her with an accusing glare, only half-joking. “You haven’t said much about where we’re going. More secretiveness?”

“We’ve been busy. I planned on briefing everyone fully in sidespace.”

“I hope you’ll soon be *de-briefing* your First Lieutenant.” He snapped the waistband on his briefs, just to be obvious.

“I thought you military types didn’t approve of sleeping with the boss.”

“I never slept with my boss until now.”

“Good to hear. I don’t think he’s your type.” Chiara pulled out a sheaf of hardcopy from her tunic, and a data stick. “Okay, Lieutenant Paloco, take a look.”

He started reading. “Hell’s Reach?”

“Some call it Hellheim, or Hell’s Homeland. And it’s just as bad as its name.”

Chapter 19

Hell's Reach, SBS *Trollheim*.

"General Straker to the bridge." The SAI's voice echoed through the public address system in the crowded gym, where Straker was pumping iron in triple gravplating. He'd woken with surprisingly little hangover, and the workout had sweated out the lingering aftereffects.

Physical aftereffects anyway.

As the klaxons for Alert Status One hadn't sounded, he grabbed his comlink and said, "Ten minutes."

A fast shower and fresh uniform later, he stepped onto the bridge, nodded to Salishan, and turned his attention to the holotank. An icon blinked, ahead along the ship's plotted course. "What is it?"

"Distress beacon. Furmian trader, it looks like."

"Furmian... why does that sound familiar?"

Zaxby spoke from the auxiliary Sensors station. "The assault carrier *Richthofen* masqueraded as a Furmian trader when we approached Terra Nova."

"Right... nomadic humanoids. Closed societies, each ship a tribe unto itself, like bands of Roma gypsies on Old Earth. Is their ship any threat?"

"Not conventionally. It's big—pushing the sidespace limit—but not heavily armed. They stay far into flatspace and transit out if threatened. In fact..." Salishan's face expressed deliberate puzzlement. "In fact, they never send one of their motherships into curved space. They detach smaller vessels to trade or deal with outsiders. That makes it particularly weird they're this deep into the nebula. It's all curved space within the boundary. They're trapped."

"And transmitting a distress call. How far away can it be heard?"

"The distress call? With all the interference, they're lucky anyone ran across them."

Straker chewed his lip. "So no chance this is a trick? An ambush?"

"I wouldn't go that far... but the odds of them laying *specifically* for us are small, I'd say. I propose we be very careful, though. The Furmians are known for their tricks, but mostly in shady trade deals. There's a saying: if a Furmian shakes your hand, check your pockets. Then again, some stories say there are no better friends to be had. A complex society."

“Let’s see what they want.”

Salishan gestured at Comms. The main screen changed to show a vidlink of a youngish, pudgy humanoid male, apparently on the bridge or command center of the ship. His skin was purplish and his head-covering seemed to be made of fine orange feathers—or perhaps the feathers grew like hair from his head. Other than that he seemed quite human. Convergent evolution, or a split from true human stock back in the days of the First Expansion?

His lip movements showed he was speaking some other language, but the auto-translation came through in good Earthan. “Hail and well met, human warship. We could use some help, if you can spare it. I’m Dromian, Senior of the Homeship *Rodolfian*.”

“I’m General Derek Straker,” he replied. “You don’t seem very senior.”

The man inclined his head in acknowledgement. “My father was killed in the attack which left us stranded here four months ago. My mother is... unwell, so I assumed leadership in the crisis. However, our succession issues are irrelevant to our current situation. What we really need is to escape this Divines-forsaken nebula.”

“How do you envision us helping... and how do you expect to pay?”

“Pay? Why, General, do we look rich enough to pay? We were hoping for simple humanoid kindness and solidarity.”

Straker resisted his urge toward generosity. “I run a mercenary outfit, Straker’s Breakers—which means just like you, we have to get paid for our services. In goods, in money, or in reciprocal services.”

“I’m sure we can work something out, though we are a poor and misunderstood people.”

“Yet I’ve heard tales of enormous wealth on your Homeships. Who attacked you, anyway, and why?”

“A force of Korven and Arattak, perhaps because of those ridiculous *myths* about our wealth... or perhaps because, for them, the real wealth is in captives. Yet Furmians are a proud people, and will never be enslaved. We prefer to retreat, but when we can’t, we fight like cornered cats.”

“Rats,” Straker corrected automatically.

“You compare us to the Rodentia? If we were not in such a desperate position, I would challenge you to a duel.”

“Sorry, no, I was—it’s a translation issue, I’m sure, not an intentional insult. Point is, we’re sworn enemies of this Korven-Arattak alliance too.

They hijacked one of our ships and crew, and we're running them down."

"Then your insults are forgiven. It would seem that our interests are aligned at the moment. If you help us leave this accursed place, I pledge to be generous with whatever we can spare."

"How did you end up here anyway? I thought you don't risk your Homeships in curved space."

"My father was a determined man. One might even say obsessed. The Korven have done us grievous wrong. At first, we remained outside the nebula and sent in our away-ships, but we lost so many of them that he decided to risk the Homeship. It was a foolish decision, and it cost him his life—and the lives of many others. General Straker, I have thousands of suffering, lost people here—innocents, civilians, children. We need your help to get back to our place in the galaxy."

Straker considered. "Start with information, up front, as a gesture of good faith. Everything you know on this nebula, this area, your experiences here—everything."

Dromian drummed the fingers of both hands on his paunch. "That's quite valuable in itself."

"Then we'll count it against the value of our help—but you'd better decide fast. We're in a hurry, and you don't seem to be in imminent danger of death, so we can always come by afterward. If we survive."

The Furmian smiled broadly. "Of course, of course we'll provide the information. I'm initiating a datalink now."

Straker glanced sharply at Zaxby, who nodded and tapped at his own head with the tip of a tentacle. "Don't worry. My intrusion defenses are impenetrable. Ah, yes. Standard protocols... a very standard set of malware... designed to mask a much more sophisticated suite of worms and thieving macros... which is why my system is completely air-gapped. There. I've quarantined or eradicated all viruses and other unwanted programs. Datalink established."

"I don't call sending us malware a friendly act," Straker said to Dromian.

"Yet in return, your Ruxin officer made similar attempts."

"Good for the goose..." Zaxby muttered.

"I'm sure he'll quit his offensive cyber-warfare," Straker said with a raised voice and a glare at Zaxby. Muting his audio briefly, he spoke to the crew. "Cut it out, would you?" Turning back, he forced his frown to fade

away and addressed the Furmian trader. “Dromian, send the information, and it better be useful. If we like what we see... what do you need first?”

“Skilled engineers and spare parts. Many of our best were killed by the Korven. For repairs to our drive systems, damaged in the attack. Unlike in open space, where we could cruise as long as necessary on inertia, this nebula’s currents of gas and particulates must be overcome, and then we must have enough momentum to push through the membrane.”

“And once you’re outside...”

“Our sidespace generators are intact. We’ll find another Homeship and seek help from our own. We won’t bother you dirtsideers anymore.”

“General...” Salishan said, catching his eye.

“Dromian, please stand by. Comms, mute the vidlink. Yes, Mercy?”

She lowered her voice as she stood beside him. “I was thinking about alliances.”

“Me too,” Straker said, nodding.

“I was thinking if we’re, ah, generous with our help, we might generate a lot of goodwill. As long as we don’t increase our own risk, this seems like one of those Pascal’s Wagers you’re always on about.”

“Small bet, big payoff?” Straker asked thoughtfully.

“Just so,” Salishan said. “As long as we’re not delayed long...”

“What would you consider to be too long?”

“Five or six hours would be useful to analyze the data we get from them anyway.”

“Agreed. Get it started. Unmute.”

While Salishan issued orders for Gurung to take a repair party across to the Homeship, Straker finalized the deal with Dromian.

* * *

Chief Vedayan Gurung stropped his kukri one more time. There were sharper knives, modern ones with molecular edges, but this one harkened back centuries to Old Earth, where his Gurkha people lived in the Himalayas of Nepal. There was something comforting and proper about forty centimeters of cold steel rammed into the guts of an enemy, or drawn across his throat, something that made a warrior who he was.

Would his blade taste blood this time? Probably not. But it was good to be prepared. Perhaps he should have transferred to the ground forces after

all, for the greater opportunity to fight with honor.

Yet he'd begun in his youth as an engineer and a spacer, and now a spacer he was, a spacer he would always be. There was honor in this too.

And it was his spacer skills that were needed now.

His thirty men, women, and Ruxins loaded aboard a pinnacle and shuttled across to the Furmian Homeship. None had firearms—after all, the *Trollheim* could shatter the Homeship with weaponry to spare, or her battlesuited marines could overwhelm the Furmian civilians, battered as they were. No, the biggest threat from these nomads would be losing valuable tools to their pilfering. He'd briefed his people to keep careful track.

There was also the possibility of a duel. The male Furmians were prickly, and often got into knife-fights, he'd heard. As a nod to local customs, he sheathed a kukri behind his back, hidden beneath his tunic.

When he stepped off onto the Homeship's grass-covered flight deck, the smell hit him. It wasn't fetid, but it was strong, the reek of exotic spices overlaid with a background of animal rankness. The small herd of sheep-like creatures placidly eating the ground cover no doubt contributed—as did their dung, which a pair of youngsters hastened to collect with a scoop and bucket. That would go to crops somewhere.

Every centimeter of the walls sported murals, some garish and simple, some three-dimensional and complex. It made Gurung feel as if he were in a bizarre blend of farm and city slum—or a post-apocalyptic landscape where nature was reclaiming civilization.

A buxom older woman in stained coveralls met him with a firm handshake, speaking good Earthan. "I'm Engineer Camdian. Call me Cam." She had a wide, open face, with short hair-feathers and a no-nonsense demeanor.

"Chief Gurung. Call me Ved, if you like. We brought what you asked for." He gestured to his people filing off the pinnacle, carrying cases with tools. Two six-wheeled mules pulled utility trailers piled high with spare parts.

"Excellent. Let's get started." Cam waved at a couple of other Furmians to shepherd the group down wide corridors, which were also filled with an eclectic collection of wall-art. Something like a dog joined them, sniffing around the newcomers and spinning its curled tail in a friendly wag.

"Is your whole ship decked in grass, with animals?"

“Mostly. Our ships are our worlds, Ved. They’re a living environment. We can survive in space indefinitely, unlike conventional ships. As long as we have power and can collect comets for water and asteroids for raw materials, the rest we can trade for.”

“Very interesting.” He kept his eyes open as they traveled, viewing the passageways with the eye of an engineer and a spacer. He noted damage, some very old, some fresh and new. Everywhere there were patches atop repairs atop rebuilds. It appeared as if the ship had been assembled over generations, welded together out of modules and hulls of other ships.

When they entered the main engine room he stopped in open dismay. Wreckage and scars of battle masked the underlying problem: all three of the great fusion motor housings were holed with openings he could walk through.

“We’ve only got five hours, guaranteed,” he said. “Maybe a little longer if the General approves. This looks like a two-week job.”

“Don’t let the holes worry you. We only need one engine running, and we’ll weld plating over them once you’ve repaired it. It’s the mechanism your help is for.”

“Right. Show me.”

They sought to get the least damaged engine running. Gurung and Cam fell immediately into engineering jargon and problem-solving. He found her cheerful, sensible, and hardworking—qualities he much valued in a woman and an engineer. Gurung ended up wishing he could get to know her better. She showed hints of deep pain and sadness, held in check and compartmentalized, yet retained her underlying poise and carriage. He admired her fortitude.

Five hours passed quickly, her people and his working well together, and he found himself wishing it would not end so soon. He wiped his hands on a rag as the Breakers finished and reported all in order.

“Fire it up,” he said to Cam.

The low-level ignition test showed nominal, and then five percent thrust rumbled briefly through the big room before Cam idled the engine again. “Amazing,” she said, showing strong, even teeth. “Your people are well-trained.”

“Thanks. We’re proud of our work.”

“That’s why I have to apologize.” She looked pained.

“For what?”

“For keeping you here.” The Furmian repair crew, mostly women and youths, opened lockers and took out firearms. They didn’t exactly point their weapons at the Breakers, but they seemed alert and determined. More importantly, they were on their home territory.

“We need a lot more repairs than just this,” Cam continued, “and I have my orders. Your ship will have to go on without you, and come back later to pick you up. You understand, I hope.”

“You must be kidding. Straker can blow your Homeship apart.”

“Dromian believes your General won’t do that. Not as long as you’re aboard. There’s no way to locate you here, no way to get you out unless you want to fight ten thousand of us.” She coughed and her expression turned bleak. “Sorry, seven thousand. Look Ved, we’ve had a horrible time of it, and more than a quarter of our people died in the attack. Both of my husbands and my eldest son were murdered by those Korven bastards. Don’t let my calm fool you. I’ve lost more than you can know. I’ll do what I have to do, for my Homeship and my people. Would you do any less?”

Gurung looked into her eyes and saw the truth there. He shrugged and smiled, his usual response to surprises. “I understand following orders. Now you need to understand this. We won’t do anything until we talk to General Straker. If he tells us to stay and work, so be it. If not, nothing you can do will force us.”

Cam sighed. “We’ll see about that.” She held up a handcomm and spoke into it. “Dromian.”

“That’s *Senior* Dromian,” the device said with a crackle.

Cam rolled her eyes. “Senior Dromian, the repair crew chief insists on speaking with their general.”

“He’s in no position to insist.”

She moved away and spoke urgently into the device in the Furmian language. After a minute, she returned. “Sorry, he says no. And I’m sorry about this, really.” She nodded to one of the armed Furmians, who separated four Breaker women out at gunpoint. “These will be hostages to your work. If you don’t do the work, they’ll suffer.”

One of the youths kicked first one, then another Breaker woman in the backs of their thighs, driving them to their knees. He appeared to relish the act, and had to be ordered to stop kicking them, a hint of frenzy in his eyes. Cam’s face was frozen, zombie-like, a woman caught between necessity and conscience.

Gurung continued smiling, despite his discomfort with the outrageous situation—less discomfort than the Furmians expected, though. The Breakers were all adults. They could take some pain, and they all had the Bug to fix injuries. He forced himself to think rationally. What would keep his people safe and get them out of this mess?

He thought back to how he felt after his young wife and son had died in a Hok attack on Gorkha-3, an event that propelled him into the Hundred Worlds military and a search for revenge. He remembered his own savagery and delight in the thought of slaughtering the “aliens,” and his confusion when he’d found out they weren’t so alien after all. The kid who’d kicked the women—that could have been him at that age, wanting to lash out, not caring who he hurt, as long as he could vent that rage at something alien.

Gurung examined Cam’s face again, overlaid with disgust, but still determined to do what she thought necessary. That feeling was dangerous, the desire to do whatever it takes, the sense of having nothing to lose. It was only when he’d risen in the ranks and regained his *dharma*—his responsibility for people under his supervision, his sense of rightness and place in the universe—that he’d had something to lose again. In regaining that, he’d reclaimed his own soul and purified his *karma*.

But Cam’s soul was far from her right now. How to recall it to her?

He put on his most sympathetic face. “I know how you feel, Cam. My family was killed by an attack too—my wife, my child. I was filled with hate and rage, and I killed many enemies... but that path led nowhere. This path you are on—”

“Spare me the lecture,” Cam snapped, resolute, angry—at him? No, at herself, ashamed of the situation, he was sure. “Pam, take those four to Holding. The rest of you will get to work on the defense grid. The sooner you complete repairs, the sooner you get out of here. That’s... that’s all we want.”

Gurung thought of the kukri in the small of his back, under his tunic. Cam was unarmed and within reach, and had no idea how dangerous a Gurkha could be at close quarters. Would the Furmians respond to counter-hostage-taking? He turned his eyes to Pam, the young woman Cam had addressed, who was separating out the four battered Breakers. There was a resemblance stronger than merely “all Furmians look alike.” Cam... Pam... He wasn’t sure about Furmian naming conventions, but he had a hunch, a gut feeling that seldom failed him.

He took one long stride to Cam, whipping out his kukri as he stepped, wrapping his left arm around the woman's throat. The knife's point he set just under Cam's jaw. "Pam!" he called.

The Furmians, not being trained soldiers, reacted too slowly to stop him. They aimed their weapons at him and others, yelling and threatening. The Breaker techs raised their hands. This was the most dangerous moment, the moment when desperate civilians might do something stupid.

"Pam! Pam! Stand down or I'll cut your mother's throat." He backed up to a bulkhead and spoke in Cam's ear. "Tell her!"

"Pam, stop!" Cam called. "Lower your weapons. Lower them!"

The older woman's authority slowly prevailed, and the Furmians lowered their weapons, still fingering their triggers, wild-eyed.

"Cam," Gurung said gently as he moved his blade away from her face, "is this the example you want to set for your daughter? For the others of your family here?"

"We just want to get home," Cam whispered, her eyes filling with tears. She sagged in his grip. "I want my son back, my husbands, my nephews... but they're gone. All gone."

"Yes, your family. You Furmians are one big family, yes? Something like us Gurkhas. My family group, my people. We know each other when we meet, and we celebrate. We take care of each other. We keep each other on the right path. Does this look like the right path to you?"

"I... I have to follow my Senior."

"I heard Dromian's mad father led you into this situation... and your new Senior is twenty years younger than you. Is he fit to lead your clan? Don't you have ways to change your leaders?"

"We can't. Turning on each other in the middle of a crisis is idiotic."

"So is turning on us. Cam, I can see you're a good woman in a bad spot. What would it take to change Dromian's mind?"

"Nothing. He's a stubborn fool... but he's all we have right now. Until the Council appoints a new leader, he's in charge."

Gurung sighed. "There has to be a way out of this other than by killing or hostage-taking. General Straker won't negotiate with Dromian under threat. He has enough troops aboard to assault and capture this ship, but that would kill even more of your people and leave you in far worse shape than you already are. Have them put down their weapons, let us go, and everyone will be better off."

“If I did that, I’d be spaced.”

“Spaced—as in shoved out an airlock?”

“Yes. So I’m dead anyway... and worthless without even one husband.”

Gurung lowered the blade a few centimeters more in surprise. “You’re a trained engineer. Are women so disdained in your society?”

“A woman without a husband might as well be a eunuch.” She spat on the grassy deck. “It’s a saying of ours.”

The saying didn’t entirely translate, but he got the gist of it. Cam felt worthless, desperate, and faced a cliff—two cliffs: her orders and her wrecked ship. She had no way down. The strategist Sun Tzu said never to corner an enemy without giving him a way out—physically, or by diplomacy. A way to save face, a way to fix the situation, however radical...

“Is there a way to depose Dromian?” Gurung asked.

“Depose?”

“Remove him. Change leadership.”

“A man of status would have to challenge him to a duel and win.”

Gurung chuckled. “I could do that.”

“Only a Furmian of this Homeship is eligible. Not an outsider—a dirtsider to boot.”

“I’m no dirtsider. I’ve lived aboard ships my whole life.”

Cam grunted noncommittally. “You’re not Furmian. You’re not of our Homeship.”

“Do I absolutely have to be Furmian? Racially, I mean—do I have to be of your species?”

“No. There have been a few aliens who lived among us, gained status. There is a famous story of Timron the Black, a Clarbin warrior who rose to be Senior of the Homeship *Voldimian* and sired many sons, enriching their bloodline even now.”

“He... married into your people? And sired offspring, despite not being Furmian?”

Cam smiled and shook herself slightly, twisting gently. Gurung loosened his grip enough for her to turn and look him in the face. “We Furmians are a fertile and welcoming people, when we wish. There’s an old joke that all a man must do to get a Furmian woman with child is smile at her. We’ve successfully cross-bred with many humanoid species. One great-grandfather of mine was Earth-human, and he sired many.”

To Gurung it seemed as if they were embracing rather than captor and captive, despite his naked blade. Yet, he kept her between himself and the armed civilians—civilians who'd also relaxed a little. Along with the Breakers, they were all watching and listening to the conversation.

They all wanted to find a way out, he realized.

Gurung saw one. He thought maybe Cam was getting an inkling too.

It was radical. It was unprecedented... but it might work.

He wondered if Straker would approve. Mentally, he shrugged. "So if someone were to marry into your clan, he'd be a Furmian? Legally part of your Homeship?"

"Yes." She cocked her head in interest—and understanding dawned.

"He'd acquire his wife's status until he established his own."

"Tell your daughter and your people to remain calm, please. I'm going to put away my blade."

"Pam, stow your weapons and back off."

"Mother—?"

Cam said something in rapid-fire Furmian, and Pam slung her firearm and backed up, sulking, as did the others.

Gurung raised his voice. "Breakers, stand at ease. No sudden moves."

Once he was sure everyone was relatively calm, he allowed Cam free from his embrace, but held fast to her hand. He ceremonially nicked his left forearm with the kukri in order that the blade not be put away unblooded, before wiping it and sheathing it in one smooth motion.

Then he dropped to one knee. "Miss Camdian—"

Her face lit with pleasure. "Pelline is my intimate name."

"Pelline Camdian, would you do me the honor of taking me as your husband?"

Chapter 20

Aboard *Cassiel*, in sidespace.

In his usual seat at *Cassiel*'s copilot console—there was little peace and quiet elsewhere—Loco read over the hardcopy info and used the displays to bring up the surprisingly extensive data on the stick Chiara had given him. He didn't know where it had come from—no doubt from her underworld connections.

Also, the phrasing, while perfectly understandable, made him think it had been written by someone with Earthan as a second language. Perhaps it had been machine-translated.

The more he read about where they would go, the more it appalled him. He was no stranger to extreme danger, but this went way beyond crazy... and they were in an unarmored civilian ship that could barely defend itself. That ship also contained people he cared about very much.

The others were Breakers, so they'd signed up for the risk, but not Chiara and certainly not Belinda. He desperately wanted to head back to Utopia, commandeer a real warship with a complement of battlesuited marines, and head for Hell's Reach fully equipped.

But there was no time. The short gestation period for Korven-implanted larvae meant they might only have a few days to find the women and get the disgusting things removed—though how, he had no idea. It wasn't as if they had an autodoc or a thoracic surgeon aboard.

Loco stood and stretched the kinks out of his neck and spine, glancing at the countdown chrono. Three hours in, three to go. He headed for the cargo bay.

"At ease. Relax, guys," Loco said as men reflexively scrambled to their feet. "I'm not General Paloco right now, just the ship's first lieutenant." Even so, everyone stopped what they were doing and waited for him to say something.

The space was crammed with people and goods. Cargo lined the walls, forming shelves where men sat or reclined on bedrolls. The gravity had been dialed down to one-third to make it easy to climb, less likely to fall. The air felt close and fetid despite the extra air scrubbers and oxygen, and the toilet pod stank faintly of human waste and disinfectant.

Loco pushed open the door to the passageway behind him, hoping to improve the air. “Sorry about the conditions, but it was either this or drop you off somewhere—and I know you want to help get our people back.” He almost said *our women*. Breaker policy was equality of the sexes, of course, but the plain truth was, human males were still hardwired to protect the females.

There was no need to ramp up their primitive battle-urges on that score... yet. He wanted to keep them as dispassionate as possible.

“I know Captain Jilani gave you an overview of Hell’s Reach already, but I’m going to give you my own take on it. I’ve never been there before—has anyone here?”

They all shook their heads.

“I won’t sugar-coat it. This might be the most dangerous place we’ve ever encountered, not only because of what it is, but because of our sheer lack of equipment, intel and preparation. I seriously considered diverting home, even with the delay. Frankly, I’m not sure which gives us better odds—but the pressure of time wins out. Breakers don’t leave Breakers. Alive or dead, we’re getting our people back. We won’t commit suicide, but we’ll be taking some big risks. Anyone have a problem with that?”

The Breakers growled in general agreement. “We’re with you, sir,” Chief Sylvester said earnestly.

“Good. So here’s the deal: Hell’s Reach is a nebula. Not a friendly, calm nebula like the Starfish, but a hot mess. Thousands of proto-stars keep it churning with plasma. It has new, volcanic planets wandering around. Rogue asteroids. Electromagnetic storms, ion storms. Vortexes and gravity twists. On top of that, there are reliable reports of... *things* living in this region of space.”

“Things?”

“Bizarre things. Huge spacegoing animals. Sentient beings made of plasma living in the proto-stars. Lithomorphic life something like the Crystals we fought. Ice monsters. Other things, weirder than weird.”

“And we’re going in there?”

“We have to, Chief. That’s where the Arattak data says our people were taken by a Korven ship. They’ve been moved to a Predator base. We have almost no information on this base—why it’s there, what’s in it—but we have to suspect the worst.”

“The Korven are monsters!”

“Yes, they are. They’re as evil as anyone we’ve ever known. Their entire culture is based on predation—kidnapping, implantation and murder. Some of us have nightmares about being forced to kill our fellow humans—people on the other side of a war or some miners like we just left. We might have to fight humans again someday. But this is different. When you kill a Korven, you’re killing a monster. The only nightmares you should have are for those that got away—those that will keep on preying on ordinary people who just want a peaceful life. Like our families back home on Utopia.”

The eleven Breakers stared soberly at Loco, drinking in his impromptu speech. He hadn’t planned to make it, but these guys were spacers, not soldiers or marines. They weren’t used to shooting their enemies personally. He could see it in their haggard faces, in the way they’d twitched and blanched at the dead miners sprawled in the passageways. They needed to be absolved in advance for the violence and death they might deal out.

“Never forget why we’re risking our lives. For our fellow Breakers. Maybe some of you think we’re doing this mainly to get Admiral Engels back, but I give you my word: a Breaker is a Breaker, and I’d fight just as hard to get back a bunch of raw recruits. Are you ready to do that, gentlemen?”

“Yes, sir!” they spoke in unison.

Loco commandeered the entertainment screen mounted on the overhead and inserted the data stick. “Then let me tell you all about Hell’s Reach. Turn up the air scrubbers and oxygen generators to maximum, and somebody go tell the badgers to join us.”

The briefing and discussion took most of the rest of the time until transit. While the badgers hadn’t been to Hell’s Reach either, they had plenty of secondhand stories to tell.

By the time he left the cargo bay, Loco felt like he had a pretty good handle on things.

Cosmos, was I wrong, he thought when they transited in and approached the nebula.

A wall of plasma and dust confronted the little ship, with a surprisingly distinct boundary—something magnetic, said the reports. The bean-shaped nebula sat at the inner, galaxy-center-facing edge of the spiral arm, with nothing but empty space surrounding most of it. Unfortunately, the Arattak data Chiara had acquired didn’t specify the coordinates of their destination.

Rather, it gave an entry point and a route based on landmarks—spacemarks?—so they couldn't take a shortcut.

"God, I really don't want to do this, Loco," Chiara said as she stared at the nebula's wall. "I've done some batshit crazy things fighting the crimorgs, but this is beyond any of that. I'm not sure Cassie can take it."

"We have the shields. We have our brains."

"And if we were using them, we'd run back to Utopia and get a dreadnought."

Loco ran his eyes over Chiara's tense profile. "You're the boss-lady. Your call. I make it two or three days at best to reach Utopia and return—not counting any prep time for a ship we commandeer." He didn't point out how that might destroy his credibility with the spacers aboard, after his sobering speech about getting the lost Breakers back.

She took a deep breath, let it out. "Fuck it. Let's go. Who wants to live forever? I know where I'm going when I die."

"To Paradise? You're already the mayor."

"Funny." She leaned across to kiss him, tasting of that herbal tea she often drank. "I don't want to die anywhere else but in your company."

"That sounds like a saying."

"It is. Shakespeare."

"I've heard of him." Loco was startled, but pleased. "I feel the same way."

She eased the throttles forward. "Here goes nothin'."

"Should we activate the shield?"

"Sure, on lowest power... just to give us some buffer against the wall effect and dust."

The ship passed through without a bump and the universe shrank. No longer could they see across light-years to the distant shining stars. Now, their view was reduced to mere thousands, sometimes even hundreds of kilometers, the equivalent of a man walking through patchy fog.

"I've laid in the course," Loco said. "You sure it's wise to follow these directions from your rat buddies?"

"Supposedly these are Arattak directions, with Rodentia notes and modifications. I believe they are on the level—and what choice do we have? Besides, there are easier ways to screw us than sending us to our doom in Hellheim if that's what they wanted to do."

Loco grunted noncommittally. “First waypoint in two hours. You or me?”

“I’ll take it. You go hang with your troops.”

“They’re yours too.”

Chiara fixed him with a flat, skeptical stare. “Don’t bullshit a bullshitter. You’re the military hero. I’m just a leather-clad rogue and a woman besides.”

“Now who’s bullshitting?” He left, thinking that if Chiara could fill in the odd holes in her usual confidence, she’d be a great leader. The longer he knew her, the more he saw the wounds beneath the mask—but the more he saw, the more she seemed to think he’d turn away.

Loco resolved to never turn away. She was the one for him. He’d never thought he’d say those words, even to himself, but he thought them now: *I love you, Chiara.*

But she didn’t want to hear it yet, so he wouldn’t say it.

Not yet.

In the cargo hold, the Breakers avidly watched the screen showing the glowing gases ahead. They all turned to him as he entered. “At ease. Nothing to report. We’ll be at the first waypoint in about two hours.” He made a production of setting his chrono’s stopwatch to give them a little warning. “Suit drill. Go!”

The cargo hull exploded into controlled chaos as each man grabbed his suit and pulled it on. They buddied up and helped each other fit and test.

“Forty-eight seconds. Not bad, but not good. I want it under thirty. Chief Sylvester, perform a random suit drill every hour or two until everyone is under thirty seconds. Twenty would be even better.” There. That should keep them busy and alert.

He checked on Belinda. She was following his instructions so far about avoiding the male Breakers by hanging out with the badgers, playing cards mostly. He could hardly ask such a social woman to remain in solitary, or only interact with Loco and Chiara. He played a few rounds with them, partnering up with Bel for games of Hearts.

Once the two hours was up, Loco entered the cockpit, ready for the first waypoint. “Anything happening?”

“Maybe. I was just about to call you.” Chiara gestured at the main screen. “Those rocks are doing weird stuff.”

Loco saw what she meant. Ahead, the active sensors showed hundreds of asteroids in a pattern far too regular for the usual belt or cluster. They formed a geodesic shape, a modified globe several kilometers across, and tenuous, slow-moving bolts of lightning crawled along ionized pathways between them in a...

“A Crystal network. That’s what it looks like,” Loco said.

“I never saw one, so I’ll take your word for it. Are they dangerous?”

“The Crystals sure were, but these...” He worked his console, wishing for a military-grade sensor suite. “They’re rock, lithomorphs. But not pure crystals. If they’re azoic life, they’re probably about as similar to Crystals as two random organics are to each other. Power levels are low, but they’re rising. And some of the rocks are coming our way, slowly.”

“I’m turning away. The info we have doesn’t specify these particular Lithomorphs, but it does mention reports of azoic life in the nebula—some of it harmless, some that attacks on sight.”

“Huh...” Loco brought up the comms application. “We’re being hailed, more or less. Coming through as text, translated from machine code, so they must’ve had contact with the outside before... or maybe they listen in on the galaxy. Lots of radio waves. *Interest. Pretty. What? Why?* Single words, simple concepts, mostly.”

“Looks like they’re curious, but we’re not here on an exploratory mission. I’m keeping our distance and swinging around to get back on course.”

Loco considered. “You know, you can never have too many friends, especially in a dangerous place like this. I’d like to respond. See if I can communicate.”

Chiara compressed her lips and scowled. “In my experience that’s asking for trouble.”

“The only way to have a relationship is to take some risks.”

She shot him a glare. “Always trying to slip something in, huh?”

“Only to you, babe. Seriously, though—all first-contact situations are tricky, but they can pay big dividends—and we’re all alone here. What if these... these Lithoids can help us? What better than to have a local friend who knows the terrain?”

Chiara’s mouth thinned further. “No. Not at the cost of endangering all our lives.”

“Aye aye, Cap’n boss-lady.” He sketched a salute, which she ignored, but he thought the corner of her lips might have twitched.

The rock formation continued to extend a salient of groundcar-sized rocks toward them, connected by the network of electric flashes and pulses, but they easily outran it, skirting the cluster. Loco’s comms screen continued to text:

Hello?

Return!

Play.

Interested.

Intrigued.

Harmless!

What what what?

Why go?

Don’t go.

Return!

He read the words aloud as they appeared. “Doesn’t seem dangerous.”

“Neither is a curious grizzly bear until he wants to see what’s inside you.” Chiara pointed at the main screen. “Look.”

Three more clusters similar to the first appeared ahead, and the spherical active sensors showed nine others approaching from all directions, though at a leisurely pace.

“I’m running between them,” Chiara said, accelerating and plying the controls. The ship shuddered as more spaceborne material slammed into the shield, some of it making it through to strike the nose.

“Increasing shield power.” When the shield was dialed up enough to keep all the strikes off, Loco checked the module’s power projections. It had an auxiliary generator and its own capacitor bank, a really good piece of equipment, probably better than standard Breaker gear. If he made it back, he’d recommend Murdock buy some and reverse-engineer them. “We have about an hour at this rate of power consumption.”

“Okay,” Chiara said. “Looks like we’re past the herd of Lithoids, but they’re still following behind like a bunch of interested goats.”

“Maybe that’s not so bad.”

“What if the goats attract the wolves?”

“What if they’re more like dolphins helping the poor sailors in trouble?” Loco asked.

Chiara crossed her arms. “We have no evidence either way, so let’s quit talking about it.”

“What else is there to do but talk? I like to talk. I’m a talkative guy. It’s one of my better qualities.”

She pointedly said nothing.

“Spoilsport. When is the next waypoint?”

“Three hours if we keep just ahead of our looky-loos. Can we stretch the shield power that long?”

“I think so, if we keep up active sensors and you steer for the thinnest areas. Gonna take some active management.”

“Do it.” She sat forward and concentrated on avoiding the densest zones.

The comms screen continued to protest without letup. These Lithoids were nothing if not persistent. Maybe they didn’t get tired. Maybe movement generated power for them. They certainly seemed to be more and more energetic, not less. On the other hand, they weren’t combining into megastructures or generating singularities, so they didn’t seem to share those properties with the Crystals.

He wondered what might have happened if the Crystals hadn’t been so intent on seizing dry rocky planets and wiping out organic life, and had instead gone exploring—and found Hell’s Reach. It might’ve been a paradise for them.

Maybe there was a metaphor in there somewhere. It was a big universe. It should be big enough for everyone to find their own paradise without trying to kill each other all the time, he thought. But there always seemed to be some predator with burning ambition lurking in the shadows, ready to pounce.

The Breakers would never be out of a job.

Three hours later the Lithoids were still following in thirteen distinct groups. Loco was happy to see they didn’t combine like Crystals. Rather, the original cluster remained closest and the rest gaggled behind, swooping and flying around each other. He thought they might be playing, cavorting.

They passed through the waypoint, a quadruple proto-star that formed a broad gate. As they emerged from the brightness, they found themselves among thousands, perhaps millions, of slow-moving structures—no, Loco realized, creatures, their bodies so thin and transparent as to be barely there, like jellyfish floating in a clear ocean.

“Shit,” Chiara said. “We flew right through one of those things! I was hoping we wouldn’t need the shields for a while.”

“I’ve got ’em on minimum so they’re recharging slowly. The rocks are still behind us. Let’s see what they do...”

They ignored the jellyfish, their individual rocks moving around or the organic creatures shifting aside in a harmless dance. The Lithoids even seemed to avoid discharging their lightnings near the critters.

“What’s that?” Chiara pointed at a detector screen.

“Something big, moving faster.” The bogey grew quickly, becoming huge and approaching like a mobile cliff the size of a planetoid. Around it smaller *somethings* arrowed like attack ships. “Trying to get a good image...”

The synthesized sensor picture he captured showed a thick, blunt torpedo the size of a fortress, surrounded by smaller torpedoes of a different shape and composition. Some of the smaller ones even seemed to be hitching a ride on the larger—and the larger thing was moving through the jellyfish, scooping them into its huge open maw. The smaller ones darted around attacking their prey with mouths like buzz saws, leaving chunks of vaporous meat spinning through the void. “I’m gonna call those ‘barracudas,’” Loco said.

The jellyfish barely reacted. They moved away, but seemed incapable of resisting the attacks. Maybe these were the equivalent of plankton, a species that survived by reproducing and spreading, not by fighting or running.

“I’m staying well away from that thing,” Chiara muttered, angling downward to pass under—not that there was truly any under and over in space, but they’d long ago established a navigation grid for reference, and that’s how it looked to Loco.

Cassiel’s movement seemed to attract the attention of one of the barracudas, which turned and shot at high speed directly toward the ship.

Chapter 21

Hell's Reach, aboard the Furmian Homeship *Rodolfian*.

The Furmian engineer Camdian positively glowed, despite the grease on her face and head-feathers. Twenty years fell from her face as she sniffed and swallowed, choked up as Chief Gurung asked her to marry him from bended knee.

"I will," she whispered, wide-eyed.

Gurung stood. "How do we make this legal before somebody stops us?"

Cam held out her hand. "Give me your knife."

He handed it to her, not without a sudden alertness. Furmians were tricky.

She handled it confidently, nicking her own forearm, a mirror image of Gurung's cut, and then returned it to him. Pressing her wound to his, she smeared the fluids together. "Blood for blood, life for life, I take you Vedayan Gurung to wed and bed, as my Senior Husband, above all others I take, below only the Homeship and the Divines who protect it. So be it."

"So be it," the Furmians around echoed.

"So be it," Gurung repeated. "Should I say something too?"

Cam chuckled, and then kissed him soundly. "Too late. You're married now. Men ask, women answer—and you can't un-ask. That's our custom."

"So since we're married, I can challenge Dromian for leadership?"

"Well, there's one more custom to observe." She molded herself to him. "The marriage has to be consummated."

"Seriously? Now?"

"For it to be fully legal. The people will ask."

His grin widened, and he felt strong emotions. "I suppose I'll have to suffer it."

"We both shall." Her tone was serious, downcast, and he suddenly remembered that she was only four months a widow. Her loss was long enough in the past for him not to feel embarrassed, but too recent to be entirely comfortable.

"Uh..." he said. "I know this is awkward, but we have to put our people first. Furmians and Breakers both, together."

"Together." She took his hand and called to her daughter. "Pam, everybody stays right where they are until we... return. Nobody moves,

nobody uses a handcomm. If Dromian gets wind of this, he might do something stupid—again.”

Some Furmians rolled their eyes, and several nodded. Gurung silently thanked the Buddha that Dromian wasn’t popular.

Cam glanced around before leading him to a tool room and shutting the door.

“Here?” Gurung asked.

“Not very romantic, I know, but...” She unzipped her coverall, and then reached for his fasteners as she pressed her full lips to his. Her breathing deepened. “I find I don’t care. It’s been too long.”

Wartime romances, spawned in the middle of death and adrenaline... he’d seen them get the juices flowing in horny young troops, but he’d thought himself above all that.

How wrong he was. Suddenly, there was nothing there but her, and his desire. He swept a workbench clear and lifted her onto it. “I don’t care, either.”

Later, he held Cam’s hand as they stepped out of the tool room. Across the grassy deck, near the great engine housings, the Breakers got to their feet from where they’d been sitting, staring expectantly. The Furmians broke out in applause, lightly striking the backs of their left hands with the palms of their rights, and the Breakers joined after a moment’s hesitation. Gurung felt as if he should blush and take a bow.

Cam led him to the waiting assemblage. “Chief Gurung Pel-Camdian is now my Senior Husband in fact and in name. That means he’s your new boss—and Pam, he’s your new father.” She repeated these words in Furmian.

The young woman lowered her head. Gurung expected her to be resentful, but she only looked relieved. In this case, the Furmians’ patriarchal culture made things easier.

Cam switched on her handcomm, which began yelling at her in Furmian. She spoke sharply into it, listened, and then spoke again. When she’d ended the conversation she said, “Everyone follow me. I mean... Husband Vedayan, I suggest we all pay Senior Dromian a visit in the control center.”

“Absolutely. Lead on, Engineer Camdian.”

“First, your knife.”

Gurung raised his eyebrows and handed the kukri to her. She carried it to a workbench with a spin-grinder, which she activated. "Sorry about this, but it's necessary."

When Cam placed its razor-sharp edge against the spinning disk and blunted it, he winced, but said nothing. She must know what she was doing. She also rounded the point slightly before handing it back. "This is how we keep our dueling blades. Less likely to kill. If you kill your opponent, your life is also forfeit."

"I understand. But... without the likelihood of death, what keeps a leader from being challenged repeatedly?"

"If you lose, you may never challenge again... and you and your wife and her other husbands, if any, are all exiled from the Homeship. If you're lucky, another Homeship will take you in. If not, you are Outcast."

"That's a big risk."

"Yes." Cam caressed his cheek. "But in this case, I would find it easy to leave here and join my new husband with his people. So I have little to lose."

"You're a clever woman, you know that, Cam?"

She blushed. "On a Homeship ruled by men, a woman has to be clever."

"I understand." Gurung reflected on his own people's marriage customs. Although the ideal of romantic love was widespread, the truth was that many married for pragmatic reasons and hoped for love to take root and grow later. His one true love had been cremated according to custom, her soul freed to move on.

Now was the time for practicality, and for *dharma*.

"Let's go depose Dromian. Husband."

The troop of more than fifty aliens and locals marching resolutely through the ship excited comment wherever it went. Children giggled and pointed at the Ruxins, the few Furmian men they saw scowled and furrowed their brows, and many women stared with curious interest. It occurred to Gurung that most of the three thousand Furmians killed in the attack four months ago must have been fighting men, leaving a lot of widows without husbands and young women without prospects.

As they walked, Cam briefed Gurung in low tones about the procedure for challenge. She seemed to take it as a given that he'd beat Dromian in a fair duel, but he resolved not to be complacent. Also, though he didn't raise the point, Furmians had a reputation for breaking rules, even their own. As

long as they got away with it, a Furmian's tricks and gambits were admired, not discouraged.

The two men guarding the control center merely gawked as the Furmian women and teens marched their prisoners through the open double doors and into the spacious, gymnasium-sized room. Security was obviously lax, at least where locals were concerned. Everybody knew everyone else, of course.

Unlike the other decks, this one was free of plants, animals, and soil, resembling a real ship rather than a flying habitat. It was hardly shipshape, though. Gurung wondered if that was something he'd be able to change... assuming this all worked out. If it didn't, well... who wanted to live forever, anyway? The cycles of life would continue without him.

Dromian stood on a raised dais in the center of the room, from which he could call orders to the consoles arranged in circles around him. Form followed function; Gurung found most bridges or control centers followed one of two patterns: the boss in the center of circles, or at the back of a room facing forward, in either case looking over the shoulders of his officers. The Furmian Senior stared over the heads of his staff from his vantage point, eyes narrowing as the people trooped in and filled half the space.

He grasped the rail at the edge of the platform. "What's the meaning of this? Cam, these aliens should be making repairs."

Cam remained silent while Gurung spoke. "*These aliens* were happy to help fix your engine, Senior Dromian. In return, you ordered us taken hostage and our women beaten." He gestured at the four Breaker women, who'd been briefed to present themselves as disheveled and hurt—even though the Bug had restored them to health already. It was important to play to the Furmian audience, to make Dromian look bad—worse than he already did.

Fortunately, he was unpopular already.

Dromian gestured expansively and spoke sarcastically. "I *apologize* for doing what was necessary—securing skilled personnel for our Homeship. If you work hard, we'll release you after we get out of this Divines-forsaken place. If not, you'll be punished."

"Beaten, you mean. Tortured, maybe? Is this how you treat guests of your society?"

“You’re no guests. You privileged majority humans look down upon us nomads and our traditions. You sneer at our farm animals and our primitive ways—oh yes, we’ve all heard the whispers and seen the showvids about us, docuvids that make us into curiosities. When we approach your systems you call us vagabonds and criminals, guilty until proven innocent. No, it’s you who treat us badly, the guests of *your* society—only your beatings are administered to our honor, in the media across human space and the Middle Reach. So spare me your condescension. We don’t need it.”

Gurung could see how Dromian held onto power—he was a clever speaker, twisting words and meanings. Gurung wasn’t, but he’d found in his forty-seven years of life that only one weapon, properly applied, could counter such spin.

The truth, as simple as possible, hammered home.

“We’re not the humans you’ve dealt with before. We came to help. We acted honorably with you. In return, you attack our women. Is that what a good man does?”

Dromian opened his mouth, no doubt with some smooth reply, but Gurung was ready. “No!” he shouted, stepping forward and pointing. “I say you have dishonored your people and your position. I challenge you for leadership of this Homeship.”

Behind him, Cam had been speaking Furmian into her handcomm. People began flooding onto the bridge as the words were passed throughout the ship. Gurung could hear many whispering and translating for those who didn’t speak Earthan.

“You have no status to challenge me, *outsider*.”

“He does,” Cam said in a strong voice. “He is my Senior Husband. We married and consummated this last hour. I have twenty witnesses.” She gestured toward her people.

“That’s ridiculous.” Dromian’s eyes shifted side to side, clearly assessing the mood of the crowd. “It’s a trick.”

“If it’s a trick, it’s a good one,” an old man said. Off to the side, he seemed like a man who seemed to be of high status, from his rich, neat clothing and gold-plated sidearm. “Or do you think my esteemed cousin Camdian and her family would lie?”

“This is a conspiracy against me!” Dromian cried. “It’s a coup!”

“It’s lawful. If the human—if Cam’s Senior Husband wishes to challenge you, he is within his rights. You must accept, or step down.

Which do you choose?”

Dromian licked his lips and paced the edge of his platform, surveying the hundreds crowding into the room. “We’re under executive rule. I refuse on that basis.”

The old man looked around. “I see a quorum of the council. I propose executive rule be ended. It has been too long, and we must return to normalcy. All in favor, show both hands.”

He held up his hands, along with several men and women who also looked to be of high status. “Opposed?”

Dromian and three others raised their hands, but they were clearly outvoted.

“The proposal is passed. Executive rule is ended. Normal traditions now apply. Hordon Dromian, do you choose to step down, or do you accept this martial challenge?”

Dromian stripped off his jacket and threw it on the deck in disgust. “I accept.”

The older man turned to Gurung. “Human, what is your name?”

“Vedayan Gurung Pel-Camdian. Your Homeship’s chief engineer, it seems, at least for an hour or two.”

The man ignored Gurung’s attempt at wit. “I am Bundan Lin-Melikian, Senior Trader. Do you know the rules of the duel?”

“One blade each. Fight until one yields or leaves the circle. If one man dies within a day of injury, the other is exiled, with his family.” That last rule made things interesting, and reduced the chance of vicious blood feuds and death.

“Correct. Prepare yourself.” Melikian pointed. “The dais shall be the battle circle.”

Gurung stripped off his tunic and undershirt, as was traditional, fighting in trousers and boots alone. His squat, muscular body was crisscrossed with scars, the remnants of damage the Bug didn’t heal, the results of many, many combat actions and his work around dangerous machinery.

Kukri in hand, he stepped onto the platform. The arena had four quarter-circle rails and four openings. The rails had enough support poles that a man was unlikely to slip under—so one way or another, he had to get Dromian through one of the four gaps, or over a rail.

Dromian stood, bigger, taller, and much heavier than the short Gurung. There was muscle under his flab. No doubt he’d use these advantages... but

what other tricks might the man have?

He focused his eyes on the Furmian's knife, searching for a smear of poison or drug, but he saw nothing. The blade was heavier and shorter than his own. It was a straight line of shining metal with a single edge and a dull point. This heightened his respect for Dromian. Double-edged knives often indicated a fancy mindset relying on complex, unreliable techniques. Real blade work was simple, straightforward—and deadly.

In fact, he'd have to guard against the instinct to kill. If Dromian died, Gurung would be exiled—in essence, losing the fight even if he won. That was Furmian tradition. And that gave Dromian an edge. He'd be accustomed to injure, and to win, but not to kill. That made these duels something more like a dangerous sport.

"Are the combatants ready?" Melikian called in a formal, booming voice.

"I'm ready," Dromian replied.

"Let's go," Gurung said.

"Fight with honor. Commence!"

Gurung held his point upward, in accordance with his training. In fact, the heavy kukri was more like a short sword than a combat knife.

Dromian advanced like a cargo loader, arms wide, blade held point-downward. In fact, he used the knife almost as an afterthought as he jabbed like a boxer. His long reach kept Gurung from slashing under to slice his opponent's legs. In a killing fight, he'd slip inside Dromian's guard and go for a vital spot to end it quickly, but not this time.

How to win without killing?

He slashed in short strokes at Dromian's hands and arms. His edge, while dull, would still split skin and bruise muscle, perhaps even break fingers. Dromian blocked with his knife laid along his own forearm, or yanked his hands back. He tried out a few low kicks. These Gurung countered easily. He'd long ago added Muy Thai to his Kung Jiu workout, and slipped in a couple of hard kicks of his own to Dromian's thighs, kicks that would slowly take their toll.

Suddenly, Dromian roared and charged in low, going for a grapple. Gurung slammed his pommel onto the man's back to little effect. Gurung had been aiming for the base of the skull, but the move caught him by surprise. Dromian seized Gurung around the waist and lifted, clearly aiming to throw the human out of the ring.

Gurung wrapped both his arms around his opponent's head and held on tight. Dromian tried to shove him over the rail, but Gurung wouldn't let himself be peeled off.

Once it was clear he couldn't get Gurung out this way, Dromian reared back and slammed Gurung's back against the rail. Though he knew it was coming, the agony almost paralyzed him as the blow fell on his left kidney. Keeping his left arm locked around Dromian's head, he levered his blade around to dig its point into the Furmian's face. He was aiming for the eye, but Dromian jerked back and let go, slipping out from under Gurung's grip.

The Furmian was breathing heavily already, clearly out of condition, unlike Gurung. Maybe that should be his strategy—outlast the man. In the pause he became aware of the crowd yelling and hooting. He thought some of them were cheering him rather than his opponent.

Dromian shifted his grip on his blade to hold its point upward, like Gurung's. Why? Some trick or technique? Was it a renewed willingness to stab or cut with the dull edge, risking disaster in order to win? And, as Gurung had showed, even if life was not at stake, the possibility of losing an eye was daunting.

Or of losing something else? These Furmians were proud of their families, prizing their ability to have lots of children. He wondered if a kick in the stones would pain a Furmian as much as a human. Cam's parts had all been reasonably familiar—convergent evolution again, or species-mixing?—so he presumed Furmian men had soft parts to protect...

But no, they'd made a point of honorable fighting. He had to do it another way.

No killing. No dirty fighting. Everything went against a modern soldier's training here.

Dromian lunged for him again, going for another grapple. This time, Gurung was ready. He danced away and slashed, opening up long bloody cuts on the man's flung-wide arms.

Dromian was slowing. He was puffing now, and bleeding. Gurung was now certain that his best chance was to exhaust the larger man. Putting this strategy to the test, he made quick slashing attacks, refusing to get in close, circling and side-stepping.

"You dance and weave like a woman!" Dromian roared at him. "You dishonor this ring, and our traditions!"

Gurung sensed the crowd was listening. Even if he won this, he couldn't have it said that his victory was tainted.

"Let us see, then," he said loudly, "if Dromian can defeat a woman, or if he is too weak for even that."

The crowd laughed. It wasn't a full-throated roar, and there were no jeers, but they did find it funny.

Dromian's face was darkly flushed when he came on, thrusting for Gurung's vitals. Perhaps, Gurung thought, he'd miscalculated again. If he enraged Dromian so much that he would go for a killing thrust, that gave the bigger man a new advantage.

The fight became grim. Both were sweating and bleeding. Even Gurung was breathing in heaving gasps now. They circled and glowered at one another.

Suddenly, Dromian staggered and seemed close to passing out. Gurung suspected it was blood loss and exertion simply taking their toll.

Gurung sprang upon him, knocking the bigger man off his feet. Dromian went down on his back. Getting his hands under the monster's armpits, Gurung heaved him, dragging him toward the edge of the circle.

Just as he shoved Dromian out of the arena to the hooting calls of excitement from the crowd, an explosion of pain gripped his guts.

Dromian had thrust his knife deeply into Gurung's abdomen as a final act of defiance.

"Foul!" called out Melikian. "Dromian loses—dishonorably!"

"I don't care," Dromian wheezed, unable to do more than gasp out the words as he lay dying on his back. Blood was everywhere, flowing from a dozen cuts. "The human has paid for his insolence with his life."

Gurung looked down. The knife was lodged in his belly. That upward angle—could it have reached his heart? His aorta? He wasn't sure, but he knew he wasn't feeling too good.

Spinning around and falling, he looked up to see Cam crouching over him, calling for help. She had blood on her hands—his blood—and a wild look in her eyes.

Chapter 22

Cassiel in Hell's Reach.

The barracuda-creature accelerated at high speed directly toward *Cassiel*, ignoring the prey-creatures nearby. "Tail gunner!" Chiara barked, wrenching the ship around and running the fusion engine up to full. Adrenaline shot through her, as familiar as the many times she'd threaded her ship through danger.

"It's gonna catch us," Loco said, mashing the controls for the chaff-flare dispenser and the blinding laser.

The tail gun hammered, and Loco's board showed the point defense laser in the top turret already on auto, but out of firing arc. Raj called, "I can't get a lock for the engine flare, boss, and besides, the shields are filling up with plasma."

It was true; the bubble of shields around the little ship was rapidly turning opaque as some of the engine exhaust was retained within. "That's the problem with add-on modules," Chiara snarled. "Always something not quite right. Loco, drop the shields, but be ready to snap them on again at your discretion."

"Roger." He shut them off and Chiara pumped the throttles, providing gaps in the engine exhaust to shoot through. The line of twenty-millimeter shells stabilized on the barracuda's nose and the creature exploded.

"Nice shot, Raj," Loco said.

"Thanks... but more are coming."

"God preserve us," Chiara said, icy cool piloting instinct and hot panic competing within her veins. Apparently alerted by the death of their comrade, the barracudas all turned toward its killer—*Cassiel*. She shoved the throttles to their stops and headed back the way they'd come, between the proto-stars, the only thing she could think to do. "When they reach us, we're dead."

"Twenty seconds," Loco said. "The point defense laser got one... two."

"Out of how many?"

Loco checked his board. "Sixty-eight. Yeah, we're dead. Chiara—"

"Mind your board! Use those countermeasures!"

Loco was already doing so, his motions were so practiced he barely needed to pay attention. "Barracudas don't care about the chaff and flares,

and the blinding laser doesn't have much effect. I doubt they have eyes to blind. Chiara, if we're—"

"Oh, great. Stupid rocks in the way! God, can't we catch a fucking break?" On the screen ahead the Lithoids loomed, directly in *Cassiel's* path—one in particular was dead-ahead. Chiara vainly tried to aim for a gap between its solid components and prayed aloud, "Our Father, which art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name..."

"Five seconds to impact, and there's still about fifty following us," Raj reported calmly, his gun hammering.

"Shield on full," Loco said as he ran the bar on the control to the top. The ship thrummed with the power expenditure and the sensors lost all contact with the rest of the universe as the full-power shield blocked everything, even the entire EM spectrum. Briefly they were enclosed in a bubble of reflective silver like a Christmas ornament.

Cassiel shuddered with heavy impacts, transmitted from the barrier of the shield through the mounts of the module to the ship's bones. "How long will it hold?" she asked.

"Only a few seconds at max level. Chiara, I need to tell you—"

The ship jerked and Chiara's head slammed forward, then back, wrenching her neck. Belatedly she pulled on the head-harness that would have saved her from the pain, its smart fabric wrapping her face. The integrated goggles covered her eyes. She noticed Loco doing the same in imitation—just in time. Another blow caused the entire safety system to tighten, immobilizing everything except for the hands that gripped the controls.

Alarms shrieked with two more terrible impacts, and she heard every spacer's nightmare, the deadly hiss of an atmo leak. Smoke sprang up from an electrical short and leaped like a demon straight for the hole hidden deep behind the consoles.

"Plugging gel," she gasped, and Loco deactivated his harness to grab a bottle of the quick-setting goop. He stuck it deep behind the control board, near where the smoke was still arrowing for the hole, and triggered it. Even unseen, the foamy stuff should find the hole and plug it. It was always a bitch to clean up, but better than dying.

She loosened her own harness and sprayed the incipient fire with an extinguisher. The suppression gas followed the smoke for a moment, and then stopped. "How bad are we hit?"

Loco turned the damage-control screen toward her, showing a Christmas tree of colors. “Bad, but could be worse. Why are we still alive?”

Chiara pointed to the main forward screen. The shield had already snapped off as it ran out of power, and the gap she’d headed for abruptly widened, forming a clear tunnel as if in answer to her prayer. “Thank you, Lord,” she breathed. Unbelievably, they were sailing through clear space.

“They’re gone. Look!” Loco threw up a reverse view. It showed the Lithoids forming a wall behind *Cassiel*—and scores of dead barracudas.

“What happened?”

Loco pointed as a lightning bolt reached out and fried the last living barracuda in sight. “Wow. I knew it! They’re friendly!”

“That doesn’t prove anything. They could just be defending themselves, not us.” Chiara could feel the doubt in her own voice, though. At the moment she’d begun praying, the Lithoid had formed a tunnel *through the middle of itself* to let the ship pass. Divine intervention, or natural behavior? Or something in between—the benevolent intelligence of a bunch of rocks?

“You might be right, though,” she admitted grudgingly.

“Glad if I was. Otherwise...”

“Yeah.” She navigated through a gentle turn to resume their original course. The rocks parted to let them through, further reinforcing the theory of friendliness.

“They’re still trying to talk to us,” Loco said, tapping a screen full of text.

Chiara heard his implied question. “Oh, hell. Go ahead and talk to them.” She flipped the intercom. “Chief Sylvester, you guys all right back there?”

His report was clipped. “Could be worse, ma’am. Damage control and repairs initiated. Report to follow. Sylvester out.”

She sighed, checking her status board. “No shield. We’ve got a leak in fuel tank two, the comms array is beat to crap and the heat exchanger’s bent almost in half. Structural integrity monitor shows several weak spots in the hull. If the rocks even rub up against us like friendly cats they’ll destroy us. *Cassiel*’s not a warship, Loco. That was far too close.”

“Yeah.”

A knock came on the door, and then Brock stuck his muzzle in. “Cap’n, Raj says from his view out the back, we’re okay for now. The rocks seem to be protecting us. They chased away that big thing—zapped the hell out of it

with lightning bolts. The chief and his people are working on repairs and I'd be in the way, otherwise I'd help. You got anything needs doing?"

"I—no, thanks, Brock. Keep watch, stand by..." Her neck hurt like hell and her mind felt fuzzy. Wasn't the Breaker Bug supposed to fix these things? Even as she thought about it, her head began to clear. Maybe she was hurt worse than she'd thought, but the biotech would make it all better.

"And Cap'n... sorry about Lorenzo. He was a good kid."

"What? What did you say?"

Brock's furry face froze and his whiskers stood straight out. "Oh, shit. Captain, I'm so sorry... I thought the chief would've said something already. Lorenzo..."

Chiara leaped out of the seat and pushed her way past Brock, down the short passage and into the cargo hold. The air stank of chemicals and short-circuits, burning plastic and ozone and fear. In the hold, suited figures with their helmets open and their gloves off worked on systems, passing tools and barking technical orders. One man remained sealed in his suit, lying atop a stack of containers and strapped in place.

When she rushed to him, she could see a neat hole in his faceplate where something small and fast had penetrated. The back of the helmet was unmarred, but the faceplate's inner surface was smeared with red gore.

Cousin Lorenzo.

Touching her forehead to the faceplate, she began to keen in anguish.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and shook it off roughly, turning to scream at Loco—and saw Brock instead. She could explode at a friend, at her lover, but not at an innocent subordinate. Instead, she allowed herself to be drawn into a furry hug. "I'm so sorry, Captain Jilani. It's never easy to lose family, but we're with you."

"Are you?" she whispered.

"Yeah." He pulled back to touch his black pug nose to hers. "We don't care about Lutan's orders—not anymore."

"He must have leverage on you."

"He does. Our families. We'll deal with that when the time comes, but here and now, Raj and I are with you, boss lady. And *your* family."

"My family?"

"Loco and Belinda. And the Breakers. We've seen how you are with them, and we're sick of being treated like disposable employees. If you're

okay with it, we'd like to be considered part of your family too. To help make up for Lorenzo."

"I—Brock, I don't know what to say." She felt tears welling in her eyes. "I can't handle all this right now."

"Yes you can. I've only known you for a little while, but you're strong. We're stronger together." He squeezed her shoulders and let her go.

She took one more look at Lorenzo, and then made her way back to the cockpit. Taking her seat again, she said, "Lorenzo's dead."

"I figured from what Brock said. Gods, I'm sorry, Chi."

"Loco, does it really make sense to risk all of us to try to rescue six?"

"You're thinking of abandoning the mission?"

She rubbed the bridge of her nose, trying to stave off an incipient headache. "I'm thinking of saving our lives and letting Straker and the first-string team do it. Wherever they are, I'm sure they're better equipped than we are. We're crowded into a fragile tin can, one twitch away from imminent death. One of us has already died. What's the point of rescuing people if we don't actually get them to safety?"

Loco took her hand. She wanted to pull away—why?—but didn't, and after a moment his warmth seemed to sink into her veins. "It's natural to be shocked by losing a comrade—a family member—to be scared."

"I'm not scared. I'm... reassessing."

Actually, he's right, she thought. I'm terrified. Why? I was never this frightened when I was on my own.

Because someone's dead? Or because on my own, there was nothing to lose. Because I'm nothing. Nothing but a force for anger, for revenge, for raining hellfire and destruction onto my chosen enemies until one day Mother Mary takes me home to see my ancestors. But Lorenzo got there first and it's my fault. What am I going to tell his mother? It'll destroy her.

So what's changed? Having people under my command? I've had a crew before, mercs like Brock and Raj, now and again a few others with grudges against the crimorgs, but never...

Never people I cared for. Especially Loco. Loco is a guy I can't seem to get out of my heart and can't seem to drive away, who'd cheerfully die for me if I let him. What kind of nut case *does* that, especially for a worthless addicted bitch like me?

She found her free hand inside her tunic reaching for the tube of Erb, and barely had the presence of mind to turn the motion into scratching an

imaginary itch. She felt like she was coming apart, and no Breaker Bug would hold her together.

And now Loco was watching her with that goofy doe-eyed look he got when he was touching her. It was just hormones, just lust. She had a plain face, but a great body, and she turned him on and he liked a challenge so the bitch part was a plus in this case, but what they had wasn't real. It *couldn't* be real. Nobody could love her. Her father had told her so many times as a child, after he'd drained his bottle of cheap grappa and her mother had retreated to her bed, stoned on Erb like half of Paradiso.

For God's sake, Chi, pull yourself together. You're the captain.

"I'm not scared," she said more strongly, shaking off her doubts once again, putting on the mask she wore to keep the world at bay. "But we got lucky that time, and there's no guarantee we'll get lucky again. We could all die."

"One thing I learned a long time ago," Loco said, still holding tight to her hand. "There's no guarantees in life. We take what we're given and make the best of it. Doesn't your God say to do that? And if you really believe in Paradise, then dying is no big deal."

"For me, maybe. Not for you and the rest. Not for Lorenzo. He didn't sign up to get killed."

"We're all volunteers here, Chi—the Breakers, the badgers, even Belinda. They could've bailed out on Mechrono-7, but they didn't. The badgers—don't tell me it's just good business on their part. Mercs don't go on suicide missions. Not unless they're not mercs anymore."

"Crimorgs can inspire loyalty—and fear. Brock confirmed Lutan has leverage, but he said he and Raj are with me. With us. But the Breakers are doing it because *you* say so, Loco. If you say different, they'll be relieved not to face death here in this Godforsaken wilderness."

"But it's not Godforsaken, is it, Chi? If there is a God like yours, or even any god—the Unknowable Creator, Gurung's Buddha, the One Above All, Ullach, anyone—they sure stepped in today. We were stone-cold *dead*, Chi, and something saved us."

"Not all of us."

"Maybe that's just the price to be paid. Should we be angry we lost one, or grateful fifteen survived?"

"I don't know, Loco. I just don't know."

“Chiara, I tell you, I can feel it. Even if it’s just the collective consciousness of the universe guiding a network of intelligent rocks, it’s looking out for us. Maybe it always was. Derek and I came through so many impossible situations... I guess I always believed in something. Not in big fancy buildings or in symbols and costumes and funny hats, but in... in *friends*, in comrades, in family. In people we love. If there’s really a God, he works through people—humans, Ruxins, badgers—or through living rocks.” Loco pointed toward the screen. “You say you’re a believer and you think I’m not—but I am. I believe in what I see, and in we have—and in the Breakers, and in you. Come on, Chi, believe your eyes and your heart! You know it’s true.” He emphasized this by squeezing her hand in a grip so tight it hurt.

Chiara felt her walls cracking and her eyes leaking again.

No, no, not here, not now.

She reached out to lock the cockpit door, terrified someone would pop their head in and see her coming apart. Stupid, yeah, since they’d already seen her in the back with Lorenzo, but that was mourning a dead man. This would be... bad for morale, she thought. Not that she was thinking all that clearly right now.

“Loco, I—we can’t do this anymore. Not now.”

“Do what?”

“This thing we’re doing. Talking about us and family and relationships instead of the mission. We’re in the middle of hell, surrounded by things that want to kill us.”

“And protected by things that took a liking to us for no reason at all. Doesn’t your holy book say you’ll be protected by guardian angels when you need them?”

“For He will put thee in the charge of His angels, to guard you on all your paths.”

“That’s pretty damned clear. We’re here for good reasons—for righteous reasons, Chi. To rescue innocent people, and to punish the bad guys who took them so they can’t fuck people over again. If there really is a God who rewards righteousness, we’re due for some rewards. If not, well, hell. I’m still gonna do the right thing if I can. I’d like to live life—with you, Chi—but if I die in the process, I can live with that.” He chuckled—at his own stupid joke, but that was Loco.

Chiara sighed and pulled her hand away. Hanging her head, she let her tresses cover her face and her weary tears. She was tired of fighting—fighting the universe, fighting with Loco, fighting herself and her own demons. She wanted to go home and curl up and dose herself with Erb and sleep for a year and let someone else take over everything, but she couldn't.

Someday, maybe, but not today.

Once more, she went to the well of resolve deep within her own soul. She felt it down there at the bottom, reduced to thin dregs, but not completely dry.

“Okay.” Chiara rubbed the curtain of hair against her eyes to absorb the tears, and then tilted her head back against the headrest. Blowing a breath out to clear her face, she forced a smile. “Okay. You sold me, Loco. The rocks are angels and God wants us to go on with the mission. So let's do it. Win or lose, live or die, let's fucking do it. Let's barrel down this path, rescue our people and kill anything that gets in our way, come hell or high water.”

“*That's the woman I—uh, know.*”

She shook her head, not trusting herself to say more. She'd wanted to make her declaration in a biting, sarcastic tone, but somehow it had come out straight and true.

“So what do the angels say?” she said.

Loco scrolled down his comms screen. “I sent them a few words—*thank you, we like rocks*, stuff like that—and they've been talking nonstop ever since. They're like a pack of kids with a stray dog they just discovered could speak.”

The door chimed and Chiara unlocked it. Chief Sylvester stuck in his head. “We've got the leaks sealed and as much repaired as we can right now. The heat exchanger's working at about sixty percent. The atmo's clear. The comms array should be working, more or less, except for the tightbeam laser transceiver. That's destroyed and we got no replacement. And...” He turned to Chiara. “What should we do about Lorenzo?”

Chiara couldn't find it in her to speak, to decide. Thankfully, Loco eventually said. “For now, put him in a container in the airlock, open to vacuum. We'll have a service as soon as we can.”

And space him, she thought. They had no cryo, nowhere to store the body inside.

“Aye aye, sir.” Sylvester returned to the hold.

Chiara took a deep breath, let it out, then did it again. “Loco, I want you to take charge.”

“What?”

“I’m not cut out for this—being in command of more than just me. I don’t know how to do it, and I don’t have the strength.”

“Chi, if I thought that was the best thing I’d do it, but I think it would be a mistake.”

“Why?”

“Because... because you’d never be yourself again. You’d always have that in your head, that you gave up.”

“I’m not giving up on the mission, just on being the boss.”

“You’re a natural boss, Chiara.”

“No. I’m naturally independent. Actually, I hate authority.”

“Then I have to say no for sure.” Loco gave her a weak grin. “Because I’d be the authority, and you’d hate me, and I couldn’t handle that. And you’d end up hating yourself.”

“I already hate myself.”

“Why?”

She wanted to reach for the Erb again, to just get it out in the open, her addiction, the crutch propping up the precarious structure of her life, but something held her back. Fear of what he’d think. Fear of losing him. Fear of being thought a failure. “You can’t understand, Loco. Going through what I went through.”

“I know I can’t. I only know what I see right now, and right now, I see a strong woman who’s been punched in the gut, who’s been knocked down, but who has friends and family around her to help her get back on her feet and be who she was meant to be. Nobody can make it alone, Chiara. That’s something I learned between Academy and now. I’d never have made it without Derek and Carla and Zaxby and other people along the way—and that’s okay to admit. The flip side of that is this: you *can* make it with the help of the people who love you.”

“Love me?” she asked bitterly. “What’s that?”

Loco sighed and stood, defeated. “I’ll check on the crew.”

Chapter 23

Hell's Reach, Homeship *Rodolfian*.

Gurung, flat on his back within the battle-circle of the dais. "Cam... " he gasped.

"I'm here," he heard her say.

"Did I win?"

"You must stand! There is no draw—if you don't win, you lose!"

"I... " Hell, if that's what it took, he'd stand even if his guts slipped out. He reached up to the rail and pulled himself to his knees, then to his feet.

The crowd roared, and suddenly he was surrounded and lifted up in celebration. He'd dropped his kukri, but clutched Dromian's knife which was still lodged in his guts. It was best to have a surgeon pull that out.

"Cam... Cam... "

She grasped his free hand. "I'm here."

"Will Dromian live?"

"I doubt it. Not in the care of our medics. How are you still on your feet, Husband?"

"I have biotech in my guts," he gasped. "Some injuries can seal themselves. Call Straker. Tell him to send doctors. Dromian must survive, or this is all for nothing."

"At once." She let go of his hand and disappeared into the crowd. Praise to the Buddha, Cam was a strong, practical woman. A man could do no better.

Suddenly, the celebration died and the people drew back. Gurung was set on his feet, though he still leaned heavily on the rail. He saw a younger woman and two boys weeping at Dromian's side. Dromian was unconscious, and the woman was pressing the man's folded jacket to his wounds, but that was only delaying the inevitable. Dromian was bleeding out.

Melikian stepped up to Gurung, gravely handing him his kukri. "This is an unusual situation... Senior. The few times an alien has taken leadership among us, he was intimately familiar with our ways. I offer myself as your advisor."

Gurung wiped the kukri and sheathed it. "Gladly, sir. Where are your medics?"

“Few survived the attack, but... there.” Two women with medical bags pushed through the crowd to attend to both men. “They’ll do what they can for Dromian.”

“I sent Cam to contact my ship.”

“The *Rodolfian* is your ship now, Senior... and you are hers. For today, anyway.” He gestured at Dromian to make his meaning clear.

“Yes... I mean my former ship. We have skilled doctors. Will you make sure they get here as quickly as possible?”

“Of course.” The distinguished Furmian spoke into a handcomm. When he’d finished speaking, he addressed Gurung again. “Tell me, human, do you really want to be Senior?”

Gurung sat slowly on the edge of the dais, his feet on the deck, and considered. “It was a way out of a bad situation for my people. We Breakers are a family, like you Furmians. I was willing. Am willing... but I’m not ambitious in that way. Why do you ask?”

Melikian stared at Dromian dying on the deck. The medics had administered drugs, slid a drip into his arm, and were now in the process of stitching his wound closed—but even Gurung’s rudimentary medical knowledge told him he’d probably drown as his lungs filled with blood if he couldn’t get to an autodoc or a competent surgeon, fast. “It occurs to me that I should delay your doctor a few minutes... ”

“To make sure he dies?”

“Yes. I kill two rats with one trap that way. Dromian is no more, and should you live, you will be outcast. I will be appointed Senior, and I’d be a good one.”

Gurung looked down at his side. There was no way the knife had reached his heart, or cut open his largest blood vessels. He would have been dead if it had. Still, it was uncomfortable lodged there under his ribs.

Internally, the Bug was doing its work. The bleeding had slowed already. Soon, the wound around the knife would seal and the skin would even try to grow over it.

“You could’ve kept that to yourself and let it happen,” Gurung said. “The fact you’re telling me this means...?”

“I’m happy to have status and family, but like you, I never was ambitious for Senior. And I’m old.”

“The paradox of power. Only those who don’t want it deserve it.”

“And neither of us particularly want it.”

“I know I don’t. But I’ve supervised people most of my adult life. I can do it, and I’m willing to take the position, if necessary. Is there nobody else to lead you?”

Melikian grimaced. “We’re a broken ship filled with beaten old men and angry boys. The boys are deeply ashamed they didn’t die defending their Homeship. Soon they’ll marry and will carry their rage and shame into their new families. They will drink fermented milk and chew Erbaccia. They will beat their wives and children. Or, perhaps we will return to the Middle Reach, meet another Homeship, and they will send a levy of young men to marry our women and thus replenish us. This would be better, but then our boys will feel usurped, and they will still have the rage and the shame festering inside. The *Rodolfian* will remain sick for years, and I am too old to cure it.”

“But your people defended your Homeship. They fought off the Korven at great cost. They should be proud of that.”

Melikian grasped Gurung’s arm. Gurung felt a surge of pain from the knife in his side, but all he did was show his teeth.

“They need someone to tell them so,” Melikian said. “Someone they can respect. A warrior, a hero, unlike Dromian, who is rumored to have avoided the fighting. Most of our heroes are dead, and Dromian never praised the courage of those who died—or those who lived.”

Gurung thought about heroes, and Cam, and the other Furmian women he’d seen. Too bad these people couldn’t see their women as heroes too. No doubt there were heroes among them. Yet Melikian was right. This Homeship needed leadership and hope, and he, Master Chief Petty Officer Vedayan Gurung, formerly of the Hundred Worlds navy, soon to be formerly of Straker’s Breakers, was in a position to supply it. His own wants didn’t matter. *Dharma*—duty, obligation, responsibility, self-sacrifice—was the Gurkha way.

“*Ayo Gorkhali*,” Gurung said with a tired smile. This expression was rueful, but good cheer was the Gurkha way.

“That’s not Earthan. What does it mean?”

“It means *the Gurkhas are upon you*. And God help you when they come, the British would add, according to my honored ancestors. Very well, Mister Melikian. If I live to see the morning, I’ll take charge. I’ll learn your ways, and perhaps introduce one or two of my own.”

Melikian nodded. "That's as it should be. We Furmians are an eclectic people, and each Homeship has its quirks."

"I won't be your puppet, be warned."

"That is also as it should be."

The crowd parted and Doctor Mara Straker strode into the ring at the head of a medical team. She eyed Gurung critically, injecting him with something vile near the wound. "We'll take that out later. Try not to bend over or anything."

"I won't."

She then dropped to her knees and immediately injected something into Dromian's drip. Then she checked his vitals with her fingertips and attached sensors to his body. Her medical scanner made her shake her head. "We need to get him to our ship if he's to live." She signaled for her team to open a stretcher.

Melikian gestured to her. "Take him." Turning to Gurung, he spoke with new deference. "With your permission, Senior?"

"Yes, take him," Gurung said in a louder voice. "Doctor, he must live for a day, no matter what."

"I'll do my best," Mara replied.

"No matter what, Doctor, if you please," Gurung said with a significant look. "For a day."

Mara's brows furrowed in puzzlement, but she nodded. "No matter what, he'll live at least a day. And you're coming with us as well."

The team lifted Dromian and hustled him out of the control center toward the Furmian flight deck. Gurung followed, trying not to limp and move with great pain, but he couldn't hide his wound entirely. The crowd watched with interest, but none of them offered to help. They didn't want to shame their new Senior.

When they reached the ship, Gurung collapsed onto a waiting gurney. It floated him away to surgery, where the knife was carefully removed.

A day later, Gurung officially became the Senior of the Homeship *Rodolfian*.

* * *

Straker forced himself to keep a straight face as he sat behind his desk and listened to Chief Gurung's report. He was "Senior" Gurung, now, and

resigned from the Breakers. Technically, anyway.

What a strange turn of events, Straker thought. To me, he'll always be one of us. The best of the best, and welcome back any time. Or maybe now we've got ourselves a Furmian Homeship. We'll see.

"Mara," he comlinked once he'd signed off with Gurung, "How's your patient?"

"Stable. He'll be fine, physically—I gave him the Bug and opened him up myself to repair his lungs and arteries. Psychologically, he's pretty low, of course. He wants to join the Breakers, with his family, he says."

Straker pondered. "Your recommendation?"

"I'd say no. He's not the type we need—he's selfish, domineering, political—and I think he's trying to run from his problems in his own society. From my studies of Furmians, deposed leaders have a rough time, but they eventually fit in—or they move to a different Homeship. There's also his family to consider."

"Agreed. Send him back as soon as you can. Gurung made his bed and he can lie in it, the crazy little bastard. If we ever get a chance, I'd like to find some more Gurkhas and recruit them."

"For sure. I'll have Dromian back to the Furmians in about an hour."

"Good. Straker out." Another hour... the hours were piling up. Almost eight lost to help the Furmians, and no good deed went unpunished in Murphy's galaxy. Once more, his mind shied away from the compartment where he kept his feelings for Carla. He couldn't think about that now. Only the mission.

An hour later, after hasty goodbyes, *Trollheim* moved off, heading deeper into the nebula and toward the hidden Predator base their intelligence predicted. What were they doing at that base? Data from many sources had hinted at some tremendous secret, something significant because of its size or technology—or its approach to the gathering of power. The Axis of Predators was preparing something there, something that used what Hell's Reach had to offer.

Straker was sipping caff in the flag chair when the sensor officer began her report. "Captain Salishan, I'm getting an off-the-scale EM surge six thousand kilometers off the port bow, inclination nineteen."

"Shields. Put it on the holotank." Salishan stood to push her face close to the 3D display. Straker stood as well and drifted to her elbow.

The tank showed a twisting whirl of energy, like a cyclone, slowly tightening. "A storm?" Straker murmured. "In space?"

"Is this anything like the energy vortex?" Salishan asked her crew.

"No, ma'am. The EM readings are bounded by the eye of the storm, but seem to be an effect, not a cause."

"What's the cause?"

"Gravitic waves indicate a singularity, but... it's something more. It's only a guess, but... "

"Guess ahead."

"It looks like a wormhole in the process of formation."

Salishan turned to stare at the sensors officer, an ensign who to Straker's eye seemed far too young to be on the bridge. Probably a brainiac. "Is that even possible?" she asked the man.

He ran his fingers over his board. "Before now I'd have said no. Wormholes usually come and go within microseconds. The few stable ones we've identified have been part of known black holes, and they're inaccessible. This one... this one almost looks accessible, a pathway to somewhere."

"Helm, keep us well away from it."

"Ah... trying, ma'am." In the holotank, the phenomenon accelerated toward them. The range fell to five thousand kilometers. Straker felt the engines surge as *Trollheim* swung ponderously and ran directly away from the wormhole. Power generation and consumption rose in balance until the capacitors began to drain with the strain on the shields as the big ship smashed her way through dirty space.

"Rocks are getting through," Gurung's replacement called from the damage control station. "Armor's taking it fine for now, but... "

But it would only get worse as they accelerated, Straker knew. And the wormhole was gaining on them.

"Sensors, could it be attracted to our energy, like the vortex was?" Salishan asked.

"Possibly, ma'am."

Straker comlinked Zaxby. "You on this?"

"If you mean the wormhole, of course I am. And before you ask, Roentgen has focused his neutrino vision on the phenomenon and has no insight, other than to say there seems to be a singularity generating it, a fact I have already confirmed via my instruments."

“All very interesting, but I need answers. What if it catches the ship?”

“Damage or destruction. No known substance can withstand impact with a singularity.”

“What about the shields?”

“We would need Crystal-level shields powered by a singularity of our own to resist it.”

“And I bet you can’t create one.”

“I’m working on that—for the long term. And by long term, I mean years of research.”

“What about our grav-blocker?”

Zaxby paused. “Possible... possible... let me run some simulations. Zaxby out.”

“Dammit. Time to intercept?”

Salishan turned to the helmsman, Tomlinson, who said, “About twenty-two minutes, give or take. By that time something’s got to give—our shield power, the stuff we’re smashing through, or the wormhole itself.”

Straker walked to stand behind the sensors officer, “The wormhole and the singularity are in exactly the same place?”

“No, sir. The singularity is following the wormhole. Look at the holotank, please.”

The holotank zoomed in to show a red pinpoint: the singularity. From this icon a diffuse beam sprang, widening and connecting with a transparent yellow sphere running ahead of the tiny black hole. A dotted-line course projection for these two connected objects speared *Trollheim*.

Salishan’s eyes narrowed under furrowed brows. “Helm, alter course ninety degrees full.”

“Ninety degrees full aye. Ma’am...”

“I know. It’ll catch up faster. I need to know something. Sensors, give me a raw course projection update in real time for the phenomenon, no data smoothing or interpolation.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

The ship swung until it was pointed perpendicular to its former course, now blasting sideways through space. Straker tried to figure out what Salishan was observing. The projected course line followed *Trollheim* as she crabbed sideways, and then began to lead her.

“Dammit. That thing’s intelligent. Return to evasion course!”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

“Explain,” Straker said.

Salishan scowled. “If that thing was a dumb natural phenomenon, it would chase, always moving directly toward our known position. Only intelligent things aim ahead and try to intercept.”

“Like a sniper leading his target.”

“Or a shipkiller’s software. It might not be fully sentient, but it’s definitely smart.”

“How big is the wormhole?”

“Bigger than the ship.” Salishan turned to Straker. “What are you thinking, sir?”

He glanced at the damage control board. No yellow lights yet, but other readouts showed rapidly dropping capacitor reserves. Soon, they’d have to reduce speed, shields, or reinforcement—or begin losing fittings on the hull. Armored weapon emplacements would survive a long time, but sensors, antennas, heat exchangers and similar equipment would be ripped away by the detritus they plowed through.

“I’m thinking we’re the butterfly and that thing’s the net. If it is intelligent—or its controller is—and wants to destroy us, it doesn’t need the wormhole. The singularity would tear us apart. The wormhole is sized nicely to envelop us. It’s stable, and it’s on an intercept course.”

“Makes sense. Weapons, can we disrupt it?”

“Ma’am... I don’t know.”

“Zaxby,” Straker comlinked, making the feed public so the crew could hear. “Will our weapons affect the thing?”

“Possibly. Properly placed at close range, our spinal primary beam plus a thermonuclear detonation might collapse the wormhole. Given the energies involved, it should take the singularity several minutes to generate a new wormhole—assuming it can.”

“Close range, you say. So this is a last-ditch tactic.”

“First ditch, last ditch, it’s our only ditch, Derek Straker. We can but try.”

“What about the grav-blocker?”

“That will have no effect on the wormhole. It will protect us from gravitic effects, no more.”

“What if the wormhole swallows us?”

“Then we go to its other end. That’s how wormholes work. They are tunnels joining two places.”

“It won’t damage us in and of itself?” Straker asked

“Normally, no. Experiments show no damage to probes transiting a wormhole.”

“Why aren’t wormholes used more often for travel?”

Zaxby’s tone turned condescending. “Energy costs, for one thing. Power levels of that magnitude can only be generated by stars or their equivalents—such as singularities. Also, wormhole travel is at lightspeed, no more, as far as we know. If any known civilization bothered to create one for the purpose of transportation, it would only be useful at interplanetary distances, within curved space—compared to sidespace travel and its efficiency. It could be done, but seems the most inefficient method imaginable. It’s using a sledgehammer to smash ants.”

“Unless you have enormous raw power and don’t care about efficiency—and a sledgehammer is what’s handy. So... what does your big brain think about why we’re being stalked?”

“I concur with your assessment—whoever is behind the wormhole doesn’t desire our immediate destruction. Yet, submitting to capture is not in our nature as War Males—not to mention the delay to our mission. We must try to disrupt the wormhole and escape. I am already formulating possible courses of action if we are faced with capture. Perhaps the intelligence behind the phenomenon is not inimical, merely curious. It might be amenable to reason or persuasion. It might even provide help.”

“In Hell’s Reach?”

“I take your point... but we are in the realm of wide possibilities. I choose to hope, and prepare for as many of them as I can. I suggest you do the same, Derek Straker. Zaxby out.”

Straker checked the holotank. The annotation showed intercept in eight minutes. “Captain Salishan, coordinate with Zaxby for specific weapons deployment and make ready for... whatever’s about to happen. If we can pop that bubble we’ll do it, but if we can’t, we might be taking an unwanted trip.”

“With who-knows-what at the other end. Aye aye, sir.” She raised her voice. “Sound General Quarters. Go to Alert One and battle stations. Lay in weapons deployment per Zaxby’s instructions. Shields off until we launch weapons—conserve power and recharge capacitors.” She turned to Straker. “General, you should get into your suit.”

“Good idea. I’ll tell the others too.” Straker strode off the bridge and jogged down passageways full of crew hustling to their stations, many yanked from their bunks by the all-hands nature of General Quarters. By the time he reached his mechsuit and stepped into its mechanical embrace, two minutes remained until intercept. Hetson and the other mechsuiters were already in theirs.

Straker’s brainlink gave him a godlike view of the situation, processed through the SAI and drawing from all the sensors the ship possessed. Behind the ship a globe of blackness swelled, big enough to swallow her even if she turned sideways. Farther behind that globe a bright pinpoint shone—the singularity. While normally a black hole was invisible, capturing all light, Straker knew radiation was generated at its event horizon as it swallowed dust and gas, radiation which revealed its position. There was also a gravitational lensing effect which could be seen against a bright background such as the nebula. These two things, plus gravity detectors, allowed the ship’s sensors to pinpoint the “invisible” black hole, and show it to him in the VR construct of his brainlink as a shining spot.

“Zaxby, how is this singularity different from the ones generated by the Crystals?”

“With the Crystals, it was clear what generated them. Here, I can’t tell what’s creating or sustaining this one. Roentgen has detected a control beam, however, emanating from the wormhole.”

“The wormhole’s controlling the singularity?”

“Something on the other side of the wormhole is.”

“Can that beam be disrupted?”

“Never fear, Derek Straker. I’m far ahead of you. I’ve taken that possibility into consideration, of course, and have modified my weapons deployment instructions. We will simultaneously attempt to collapse the wormhole, and also cut the control beam. Excuse me, General, but I’m needed. Zaxby out.”

“Zaxby—dammit,” Straker said to an empty channel. He switched to the mechsuit channel. “Lieutenant Hetson.”

“Here, sir.”

“You ready?”

“Ready, sir.” A data push from Hetson showed the status of his four suits, all perfectly green. “We gonna see some action?”

“I have no idea. If we can’t avoid it, we’ll be taking a trip through the wormhole. No idea what’s at the other end either, but we’ll be ready. In fact... Stand by.” He widened his channel to include the battlesuiters.

“Lieutenant Bronke?”

“Here, sir,” the man’s voice replied. “Alpha Company ready.”

“Good. As I was telling Hetson, I have no idea what’s going to happen in the next minutes, but we’re suited up to be ready. What’s your deployment?”

“We’re augmenting ship’s marines in counter-boarding positions.”

“Good. Be ready to go on the attack at my order.”

“Roger wilco, sir.”

Anti-collision klaxons shrieked, in realspace and within the VR networks both. Straker shifted his attention to the ship and saw her prow turn to point astern. Her massive spinal particle cannon aimed at the edge of the following wormhole while two shipkillers leaped from their launch tubes and curved toward precise positions—one near the opposite rim of the black circle, the other into its heart.

Chapter 24

Hell's Reach, aboard *Cassiel*.

Relieved that the barracuda threat had been neutralized, Loco stuck his head up the tube leading to the cramped tail gun. "Great job, Raj."

"Thanks, boss, but it was the rocks that saved us."

"I know," Loco said. "Ain't it a hoot?"

"I don't know that idiom."

"It means, isn't it weird and amusing?"

"It sure is, boss."

In the cargo bay he briefed the Breakers on what he and Chiara knew. Brock and Belinda joined them, with Raj on the comlink still on overwatch on the tail gun.

Loco had the Breakers rig up a comms connection there for communication with the Lithoids. "The rocks saved us, and they might save us again, so we need to keep them friendly. It would also be good to help them understand what *not* to do. Some of them have already come closer than the captain's comfortable with. Chief, choose someone to chat with them. Keep them happy, give them a good impression of who we are, and see if they'll escort us along our path—or at least let us go in peace. We can't become some kind of pet for aliens. We lost a good man today. We have to justify that price by getting our people back."

The Breakers all nodded, voicing their affirmation with low grunts and mutters of *aye aye, sir*. Loco tried to spot any hint of dissent or undue fear, but all he saw was determination. Amazing, he thought, how men would continue into deadly danger to rescue comrades—or women, of course. The biological compulsion to protect women might not be the primary among reasons, but it certainly reinforced them.

Or maybe it was primary. It was surely primal.

"I'll keep you updated as I can." Loco waved for Sylvester to join him in the passageway for a modicum of privacy, and spoke quietly. "Chief, I trust you to handle everything you can. I also trust you to bring me anything you can't—and to be smart enough to know the difference. I'm not gonna bust your balls. Open door policy, right?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. I'll do my best."

Loco clapped his shoulder. "You'll do better than that, Jon. Carry on."

Returning to the cockpit, he saw Chiara had fixed her face and now had her usual insouciant expression. The transformation was like day from night. Defenses against a cruel world, he wondered, not so different from his own? Or was it something more? He resisted the urge to try to get past those defenses again. Now wasn't the time. The mission came first, and with it came compartmentalization and professionalism. Captain and First Lieutenant, not lovers and friends.

Right, Loco. Derek was right, was always right. Fraternization messed with your head.

So he said flatly, "Okay, we're in as good shape as we can be. Time to get moving toward the next waypoint... right?"

Without reply Chiara bumped the throttles forward slightly, and the ship began to accelerate along her projected course. The screen showed the thirteen Lithoid groups surrounding them on all sides—englobing them, moving with them, not approaching, giving them space.

"Hell of an escort," Loco remarked, trying not to make his words sound like an *I-told-you-so*.

"Yeah, yeah..." she said. "Three more waypoints, then the final approach. Ten to twelve more hours of travel, according to our intel."

"Final approach to what?" Loco asked.

Chiara shrugged. "You know we've been wondering that the whole trip. The info didn't tell us. Some kind of base."

"I wonder if the Lithoids will defend us if we attack somebody and draw a response."

"That's the million-credit question, isn't it? And... "

"What?" Loco asked.

"The rocks are people too," she said. "If they can speak, they're sentient. Is it fair to ask them to fight our battles for us?"

It was Loco's turn to shrug. "If they're thinking beings, they can make their own choices. I'm not ordering them to do anything. Besides, if we're risking ourselves, they can too if they choose. We're doing it for a good cause—and even more than rescuing our people, there's the bigger issue of what the hell the Predators are doing out here? I mean, it must be something really nasty that they need to do it in a place this secret and dangerous. Otherwise, they'd do it in their home systems."

"I'm sure their home systems are riddled with Conglomerate spies."

“Exactly. But if Lutan is one of the *least* nasty Korven, I can hardly imagine what the rest of them are like.”

Chiara looked bleak. “Completely ruthless, utterly alien. They don’t give half a shit about anything but themselves. They’re a pestilence, and they should be wiped out—if not as a species than at least as a power. The Arattak are hardly better, but they do have some limits. The Dicon, Crocs and Vulps are more comprehensible—aggressive, though not beyond the pale—but they’re part of the Axis and so they need to be defeated.”

“That means the stakes are high enough we’ll take any allies we get.”

“Even if they don’t know what they’re getting into?” she asked.

“Does an eighteen-year-old soldier know what he’s getting into?” Loco responded.

Chiara shrugged.

Loco eyed her critically. “You need some rest. I’ll take the next watch and call you when we’re approaching the next waypoint.”

“Okay.” She stood, and then leaned over to kiss him fiercely and search his eyes. “Thanks.”

“Uh... for what?”

She departed without giving him a reply.

He shrugged. *Women.*

An hour and a half later he buzzed the cabin’s intercom. “Time to get up and eat something.”

“Be right there.”

When Chiara dropped herself into the pilot’s seat a few minutes later, Loco stood. “Gimme five minutes to piss and run through the checklist.”

“Do it.”

Loco checked that the crew was alert and ready for the next waypoint. Belinda had played a lot of games with Brock in the badger cabin, by the look of the table and the used scoresheets, cards, and other objects scattered there. She jumped up, kissed him on the cheek and wanted to talk, to chatter about nothing. Obviously, his orders to keep her interactions with the Breakers to a minimum were hard on her, but it was only temporary.

It was a relief to join the guys in the hold, with its all-male military environment and raunchy jokes. “Hey, sir, you got a little...” The crewman—Richards, that was his name, the one talking to the rocks—rubbed his own mouth with a grin, and Loco realized he must have Chiara’s lipstick smeared on his face.

Better to play the alpha cock than to apologize for being the only one getting laid, he knew. “Yeah,” he said, “women can’t get enough of me. No worries, though—next port of call, you can take your accumulated pay to the dive bars and find your own.”

That brought cheers and uproarious laughter, far more than the joke warranted. Letting off steam, covering their fear, dealing with the close quarters—the same old story throughout the centuries, from the days of “wooden ships and iron men” until now. It seemed strange to civilians, but the lower enlisted especially really did accept “Rank Has Its Privileges” without resentment, most of the time.

“Or maybe a few of our Breaker ladies will be *grateful* when they get rescued,” Loco continued with a wink. “Carla Straker is off limits, though.” That brought more laughter, and he got a sense that they were coping.

Just another day and it would be over, one way or another.

“How’s the rock chat going?”

Richards nodded at his keyboard and screen. “Fine, sir. They’re actually pretty cool people. About as smart as your average elementary school kid, I’d say, and they’re learning more as we talk to them. They say they got lost and stuck in here too and have been trying to find their way out for years—maybe centuries, it’s hard to tell. They’ve hailed other ships but nobody ever talked to them. Some fired lasers at them—I think that was the Arattak—but they don’t seem to hold it against us. They did save our asses.”

“Yes, they did. Good work. Carry on.”

Back in the cockpit Chiara pointed. “Waypoint, ten minutes. This one’s some kind of giant exoplanet, not even in orbit around anything. I’m not sure how it stays fixed in place, with no companion body or star and all these currents and influences, but there’s some weird shit out here and I’m no brainiac.”

“Never thought I’d say this, but I’m missing our brainiacs just now. I’m sure Zaxby could explain it.”

“I don’t care. Let’s get past it and to the next one.”

“I’m with you.”

Eight minutes later a giant rocky world loomed, almost as large as one of the smaller gas giants. “High gravity, about 3.5 G,” Loco said, checking his instruments. “Far denser than a gas planet. Has a thick atmosphere, with water vapor. Warm, too—averages about 45 C. And... life signs.” He turned

to face Chiara. “How the hell can there be life on a sunless planet with gravity that strong?”

Chiara gripped her controls and bumped up the throttles as if to put an end to his question. “How can there be giant floating plankton, barracudas and intelligent rocks out here, either? I don’t know, and I don’t care. We’re making our slingshot turn and moving on.”

“Okay, okay,” Loco said, “I was just making conversation.”

She didn’t say anything. She was like Derek or Carla, when they got focused.

Loco talked more under stress, but most people talked less. He was used to it.

The rocks followed them in a tight curve around the exoplanet, skimming just outside the atmosphere. Maybe someday, if the Breakers developed a full-fledged economy, they could send a scientific expedition to this place to study the life here. It must be unique.

“There’s something ahead...” Loco reported, “an orbital meteor storm looks like. There are several thousand dense objects in our path.”

“Ready the shield.”

“Ready. Wait...” As the rocks and gravel approached, the Lithoids moved ahead to shove them out of the way with electromagnetic blasts, or... “I think they’re picking up a few rocks, taking them into their groupings. They also appear to be absorbing energy from the planet’s magnetosphere.”

“I’m happy you were right about them.” She said it less grudgingly this time.

“Me too.”

With the waypoint dwindling in the rear-viewing screen. “My shift on watch,” Chiara said. “It’s your turn to rest.”

Later when he woke from a deep, refreshing sleep, he wished Chiara was there with him. Unfortunately, they didn’t have an extra pilot, and Hell’s Reach was no place to leave the ship on autopilot. He took a sponge bath in the tiny sink. Even that was a luxury compared to what the crew in the back had. He should probably let them rotate through and wash up during the next leg of the journey.

In the cockpit he checked Chiara’s mood. She seemed completely at peace, in contrast to her earlier emotional confusion—and natural grief at her cousin’s death. She smiled up at him and seemed happy to receive his kiss with that familiar herbal aroma she carried.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” she replied. “Next waypoint is a red giant.”

“Red giant star? Among all these proto-stars? I thought red giants were old, even for stars.”

“They are, usually billions of years old. Maybe it was here before the nebula formed. Or maybe it and the nebula intersected long ago and it got stuck in here, like everything else.”

“Maybe. I’m no brainiac.”

“We’re supposed to fly right through it, but I don’t know...”

Loco gaped. “Right *through* a star? You got to be kidding me.”

“Not through the solid core, just the corona. Our route seems to assume a warship that can handle the 4000 C of a red giant.”

“Only 4000 C? That’s not very hot in stellar terms. Isn’t a yellow star’s corona over a million degrees?”

“Yes, but red giants are big enough to swallow the inner planets of a solar system, and they’re made of relatively thin glowing gas. A warship would be able to run low shields for the twenty minutes or so the route tells us to pass through the edge of the thing, but I don’t see why we should. We’ll stay away and go around. It’ll mean an extra hour, but I don’t think we can take that kind of thermal stress.”

“You seem to be asking, not telling.”

Chiara smiled, displaying that unnatural calm serenity again. “You’re my partner, Loco. I want us to agree. What do you think?”

How did she do it? Change from Crabby Chiara to Chill Chiara from one hour to the next? He didn’t get it, but hell, he might as well enjoy this agreeable Chiara while she was here. “I *do* agree. Crazy to fly through a star. Carry on, Captain Jilani.”

“Aye aye, Lieutenant Paloco.” She hummed as she steered, swooping gently up and down, left and right. It was as if she were a little drunk. Maybe she was. Loco could hardly blame her for downing a drink or two after almost getting killed, and she didn’t seem seriously impaired.

The rocks surrounding them drifted outward as well, away from the hot surface of the red giant. “Look at the size of that thing,” Loco said as they cruised in a vast majestic curve. “Its diameter is the size of a planetary orbit! It’s like a...”

“Big red balloon? Big red beachball? Big red candy gumdrop?”

“Chiara, are you all right?”

“I’m fine. How *you* doin’?”

“Not feeling as good as you. How much did you have to drink...?”

“Too much, I guess. Sorry. You’d better take over.” She stood, unsteady, and held onto the headrest. “I’m gonna go lie down.”

“Yeah... good idea.” He watched her, shaking his head. She’d never had a problem holding her liquor. In fact, he’d never seen her this affected, even when she hit the bottle hard.

Then again, he’d never seen her starting to crumble and fall apart from stress.

What could he do, other than going on a bender together, to drink it all off? Do what he’d do with any buddy, any comrade, any friend—let her get over it, get through it, sleep a lot, and hope for the best.

Be there for her. Yeah. It’d all work out.

Sure.

As the ship rounded the massive star, the sensors reported something ahead—another asteroid storm, it looked like, a big one, far larger than the one near the exoplanet. He altered course to go around, but... the asteroids shifted to intercept the ship.

Oh, shit. Were they hostile Lithoids?

He thought of calling Chiara back in, but she’d be dead asleep by now. He comlinked, “Brock, you there?”

“Here, sir.”

“Come to the cockpit.”

The badger reported within seconds.

“Sit down,” Loco ordered. “Can you work the weapons and countermeasures?”

“Sure, boss.”

“Good, because we’ve got something in our way.” Loco pointed at the screens.

Brock took a moment to strap in. Quickly and efficiently, he configured the displays and brought up specific sensor info. “The things ahead—they’re not rocks. They’re ice crystals—of a sort. Lithium, water, some other exotic stuff. Cold.”

“How can there be ice crystals this close to a star?”

“A cool star, but you’re right to ask. I think it’s because of these.” Brock made icons flash. “There are several planets close to the red giant, tidally locked so their back sides are actually cold, really cold. Their trajectories

show these things came from those planets. They must live there. Maybe they fly out and forage for what they need, like communal insects, and bring what they find back to the hive.”

“And we’re their next target. Great.” Loco examined the ship’s course. “We’re not quite going to be able to avoid them.”

“Our rocks should send them packing.”

“Cross your fingers.”

Brock held up a clawed hand. “What?”

“It means, we need some luck.”

“I’ve always made my own luck, boss.”

“Then make some now.” Something occurred to Loco. “I think I know why we were supposed to fly through the star. These things. They probably aren’t interested in hot objects, like a warship with a residual hull temperature of thousands of degrees.”

“I think you’re right.” Brock rubbed his muzzle. “Drive plasma’s pretty hot. Maybe that’ll scare them off.”

“I’ll turn directly away when we get close and give them a face-full, but we can’t get too far off course or we’ll burn too much fuel. The rocks will have to defend us again.”

The rocks did. When the edge of the ice cloud got close, and Loco turned the ship away, the rocks zapped the swarming comets with hot lightning bolts. After a few moments, they withdrew and headed home to the cold side of their planets.

“Without our friends, we’d be dead several times over,” Loco said.

“Kinda like real life, huh, boss?”

Loco chuckled. “You know what, Brock? The Breakers could use guys like you. You got any buddies who’d like to enlist?”

“Several, and I could find more. Mellivor are famous mercs.”

“You have a home planet?”

Brock’s eyes unfocused. “Not anymore. Couple hundred years ago we had a war with the Vulps that we lost. They took our homeworld and kept it as a hunting ground. They left enough of our people alive and feral, out in the wilderness, so they can hunt us for sport. When all hope was gone, our remaining ships evacuated a few habs and ran far away. Now, our males hire ourselves out.”

“And your females? Families?”

“Hidden, when they can be. It’s a problem. Someday we’ll reclaim our real home.”

Loco sighed. “Then we have something in common.”

“Guess so,” Brock said.

“God, the Middle Reach sucks.”

“Sucks donkeys,” he agreed.

Loco turned to him in amusement. “That’s a pretty good language chip you got. Do you even know what a donkey is?”

“Some kind of animal. Why do Earthans suck them?”

Loco chuckled. “They don’t. That’s the point.”

Three hours passed in companionable conversation, exchanging insights on humans and Mellivor. The next waypoint was fifteen minutes away when Loco decided to call Chiara. “You awake?”

“I am now,” she said crossly.

“I could use a pilot.”

“You’re a pilot.”

“I’m a mech pilot,” he pointed out. “You’re the hotshot sloop pilot, and she’s your ship. Drink some of your strong tea and wake up.”

A pause. “Yeah, no. I’ll get caff.” The intercom clicked off. Brock departed with a sympathetic grimace.

A couple minutes later Chiara stepped into the cockpit, handed him a mug of caff, and plopped down in her seat, already sipping from her own. “Here I come to save the day,” she said sourly.

Loco decided not replying directly was the only safe response. When she got like this, she wanted to pick a fight. He refused to give it to her.

Instead, he reported what had happened with the ice crystals, and then said, “The next waypoint—the last one before we arrive—is a weird one. The info says it’s a wormhole, and we’re supposed to pass through it.”

“Yeah, I read that.”

“And?”

“And what?”

Loco sighed. “And you’re the boss. I’ve never heard of a functioning transit wormhole, only theory. Maybe it’s a trap, disinformation.”

“Why lead us through all the other waypoints just to kill us here?”

Loco had no answer.

Chiara continued, “Let’s see what it looks like. You were the one arguing that we can’t quit.”

“I know. But what about our escort? Will they risk it too?”

That seemed to startle her. “Oh, yeah. I forgot about them.”

He only raised his eyebrows. How could she forget about the rocks? But a lot of her behavior lately wasn’t making sense to him.

“There it is,” he said as he brought up a synthesized sensor picture of the waypoint. A spherical black region of space loomed ahead of them. Off to one side, a small black hole hovered, connected to the wormhole by a cone of twisted spacetime. At least, that’s what the sensors saw. Zaxby could have provided a better explanation.

“And we’re supposed to fly straight into it,” she mused. “Through it. And at the other end, assuming we survive, is our destination... where in all likelihood we’ll be facing odds of at least a hundred to one.”

“I know we’re not a military force,” Loco said. “If we get spotted and we can’t handle what we see, we turn around and go back through. Go straight to Utopia and bring the entire Breaker military. If that doesn’t look to be enough, we can tell the Conglomerate, or try to get some other races together—maybe broadcast the information throughout the Middle Reach.”

“That’s what we should’ve done when we got the info from the Daughters,” Chiara muttered.

“Like I said,” Loco said, “you’re the boss. It’s up to you.”

“I don’t want it to be up to me,” Chiara said, shaking her head. “I’m sick of making these life-and-death decisions for other people.”

“Welcome to the club. You know, someone once said to command well, you must love your troops—and be willing to kill what you love.”

“You’re not helping,” she said.

“I don’t know how to help.”

“Take over, then. Please. They’re Breakers in captivity, and mostly Breakers aboard this ship. It should be your decision, not mine.”

Loco thought about it again. “That’s actually a cogent argument. I think you’ll regret it in the long run, but you’re a grown woman and you have the right to abdicate if you want to. If you step down, I’ll take over. But you have to take responsibility for deciding that, not me.”

Chiara bit her lip and whispered to him. “I... I have to. For now. I’m not fit to command. Not right now. And you need to know why.”

While Loco watched, she reached inside her tunic. She took out a tiny dispenser tube, and touched it to her tongue.

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Chapter 25

Hell's Reach, SBS *Trollheim*.

"Fire!" Captain Salishan's order rang out across the bridge as the advancing wormhole came near.

The weapons officer stabbed at his board and the lights dimmed with the maximum power draw of the great particle cannon.

The beam slammed into the edge of the wormhole. That boundary disrupted the beam's laser-straight course, or perhaps the beam disrupted the boundary. The two interacted spectacularly—but though it wavered, the wormhole held its shape and still reached for the ship.

Salishan gritted her teeth against a pointless order. The shipkillers were already programmed and should be detonating—

The forward screen whited out as the two warheads exploded with maximum yield. Megatons of energy plucked at the opposite side of the wormhole, and at its center, the first to destabilize the space-tunnel, the second to blank the control beam with its optimized electromagnetic pulse.

The ship's SAI, under precise instructions, dropped the particle beam and simultaneously snapped on maximum shielding, maximum armor reinforcement—and the grav-blocker. The defenses deflected the wave of EMP, radiation and blast effects with a shudder felt deep in the soles of every pair of boots on the deck.

The wormhole wobbled, deformed and popped like a soap bubble—and the singularity behind it came apart with an enormous explosion. Alarms shrieked as the damage control board lit up with yellow and red lights. Gravity dropped briefly to zero before backup systems took over and increased it gently to half on the bridge. In other areas, suited parties of spacers would already be springing into action to manage the chaos.

"Report," Salishan said as she picked herself up off the deck. She should've strapped herself into the chair as per protocol.

The damage control chief took a moment to examine his console and form an assessment. "Blast effects, ma'am, about two petajoules absorbed. We've lost the forward third of everything on the hull. The PPC clamshells held, but they're fused for now. DC teams are on it."

"Anything not repairable?" Salishan asked.

“Eight secondaries are down, but we only have two full replacement units. Depends on the actual level of damage to the eight. Everything else is replaceable, but that was costly, ma’am.”

“Understood. Carry on. Sensors, status of the phenomenon?”

“Gone, ma’am. No signs of... oh, shit.”

“Report properly, Lieutenant.”

“Pardon, ma’am. Singularity forming, eight thousand kilometers dead astern.”

Salishan slammed her palm on the holotank rail. “Helm, can we get away?”

“Ma’am... ” said the helmsman. “I have no idea where to get away *to*. This soup is so thick, we’re flying almost blind. I know our orientation because the gravity detectors plot the galactic center like a compass. The proto-stars nearby give me some reference points, but other than that, we’re in the fog.”

“Proto-stars... can we skim close to one, shake this thing off?”

“Possibly, ma’am.”

“Do it.”

The holotank showed the *Trollheim* turning toward the nearest proto-star, a mass of material much larger than a gas giant. It was in the process of aggregating more and more substance from the nebula, pulling in streamers of dust and chunks of rock the size of sand up to asteroids. The more it collected, the more its own gravity compressed it. With enough gravity, the heat and pressure increased and the proto-star glowed with energy. Eventually, spontaneous fusion began, which generated additional heat and pressure, inciting more fusion. Like a tiny campfire as its tinder glows under the breath of a woodsman, the proto-star would sputter and bubble, its fusion flickering out and being reborn as it crossed under and over the threshold.

At a certain point in the future—star formation could take millions of years—the proto-star would ignite and become stable, the gravity-driven fusion creating enough outward pressure and stellar wind to stop the infall of material. The rest of the matter swirling around the star’s gravity would form into a planetary system.

But not yet, not for a very long time here in Hell’s Reach. For now, proto-stars were unpredictable cauldrons, fraught with gravity waves, sudden spurts of hot plasma and fusion, electromagnetic squalls twisted into

gusts like winds in a hurricane. Normally, nobody brought a ship near a proto-star, any more than they would fly an aircar into the grasp of a tornado.

“Ma’am, we lost forward shield emitters,” Engineering reported. “I can extend the shields to cover the nose, but at less than half strength until we replace the modules. And we’re using up power reserves fast.”

“Understood.” Salishan chewed at a knuckle for a moment. Straker had told her to do her job running the ship, but he was in overall charge of the mission, and she needed a decision. “Captain to Straker.”

“Straker here.”

“Sir, while our tactic dissipated the phenomenon, we took a lot of damage. We can’t afford to do that again. I’m running us close to a proto-star in hopes its gravity and radiation give us some cover, but that’s dangerous too. I need to know your intentions if we can’t get away.”

“What would you do, Captain?”

She cleared her throat, a show of reluctance. “As much as I hate to say it, if these things keep coming back, we can’t continue taking heavy damage just to delay the inevitable. Nobody died this time, but as we lose shield emitters and reinforcement busses it’ll get worse and worse. I’ll have to pull in the damage control teams farther and farther, then we’ll lose armor, then blast effects will get through the thin spots—not to mention the irreplaceable shipkillers already expended. Sir, this is a battle with no way to strike at our enemies and no indication we can outlast them.”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

Salishan sighed. “If it were my decision alone, I’d let them haul us through the wormhole and deal with whatever’s at the other end. If there’s overwhelming force there... sir, I’d rather take some of our enemies with us than be destroyed by some... phenomenon. And maybe, just maybe, as Zaxby said, the whatever-it-is isn’t intentionally hostile.”

Straker seemed to think it over for a moment. “I agree. Do what you can, but not at the expense of the ship. It makes no sense to get people killed until we know what we’re dealing with. Carry on, Captain.”

“Aye aye, sir.” She turned to the holotank. It showed the ship equidistant between the singularity and the proto-star. The ship’s course would skim the outer shell of the proto-star in a slingshot maneuver. With a normal star or planet in open space this would be routine, smooth sailing through vacuum so clear they could see out into the galaxy. Salishan longed

for that visibility now, something every spacer took for granted—until it wasn't there. Like a sailing ship enveloped in a storm, the very environment threatened their survival.

"Hull temperature rising to critical," the chief reported. "Even with max reinforcement, half an hour and we'll start losing more surface systems."

"Shields?"

"Capacitors are nearly drained. Any power we shift to shields comes off reinforcement, ma'am. Engineering is already doing all it can."

She turned back to the helmsman. "Helm, how long until we swing around the proto?"

"Ten minutes should put us out of sight of the singularity, and I'll bear away as fast as I can, using the slingshot effect."

"Carry on."

Salishan threw herself into her chair, her long legs out on the deck in a simulation of relaxation. No need to let the crew see how tense she was, but she felt her molars grinding as she silently worked her jaw, one eye on the holotank, and her hands gripped the chair arms until her tendons stood out like cables.

"Bearing away," the helmsman reported.

"Gravitic sensors show the singularity still directly behind the proto-star," Sensors said. "Maybe it can't see us."

Salishan stood to stalk the deck. "Tech that can create a black hole can probably see us just as well as we can see it."

"Maybe not, ma'am. We're a much smaller source—no gravity to speak of, on a planetary scale, and our EM is masked by the proto-star. It's still—oh, shit."

"I really don't like hearing 'oh, shit' again, Mister Wegmann. Report properly."

"Ma'am, the singularity just emerged from the proto-star. It passed right through it."

The holotank showed the story. The pinpoint representing the black hole had sailed directly through the bubbling mass of the proto-star and was following in the *Trollheim's* wake. A wormhole began to form in advance of the thing.

"It didn't even faze it," Salishan muttered, then raised her voice. "Zaxby, you there?"

He replied over the intercom, his image appearing on a side-screen.
“Here, Captain.”

“I need answers. How can that thing see us? How can it shrug off a whole proto-star? How is it generated? Where’s the energy coming from for it to even come into being? And most of all, can we turn it off? Come on, brainiac, do your job!”

“I realize I’m the ‘go-to guy’ in your vernacular when it comes to phenomena of this nature, but I am neither omniscient nor omnipotent. To take your questions in order, Roentgen suspects it sees us much as he sees it—via disturbances in neutrinos, muons and other quantum-level particles passing through the universe.”

“Can we go dark? Stealthy? Become invisible?”

“Not at this range. Next question: to a singularity, even the mass of a proto-star is diffuse and vaporous. Tiny black holes can pass through planets without slowing. As for how it’s generated and from what energy, I can only theorize that it’s coming from a parallel space. We know of sidespace and underspace, but mathematical theory suggests the existence of at least five other dimensions, for a total of eleven, several of which have not yet been empirically proven. Given that I can’t yet answer that question, your final inquiry is moot. We can destabilize the wormhole using our weapons and interrupt the control beam, which violently dissipates the singularity, but we can’t know the root source of the phenomenon. As you discussed with Straker, the rational course is to accede to the implied wishes of the butterfly collector and bow to the inevitable.”

Salishan stiffened, hands like claws grasping the holotank rail as she took a deep breath. “Helm, cease acceleration. Engineering, recharge the capacitors and expedite repairs. We have ten minutes until that thing swallows us. We don’t know how long the trip will take, but I want us loaded for bear when we get there. Battle stations, full suits.”

“Captain,” Zaxby said, “the trip will take almost no time, from our point of view.”

“I thought you said—ah, lightspeed. You’re saying we’ll experience time dilation?”

“Correct. An object moving at near lightspeed experiences very little time. A wormhole in effect accelerates the object within it instantaneously to lightspeed, though there is no true acceleration in the sense of overcome inertia. From the outside, travel through a wormhole linking two places, say

one light-hour apart, will take one hour. From the inside, it will take less than one second. Therefore, as soon as the phenomenon arrives, we will emerge on the other side, from our point of view.”

“Understood.” She drummed her fingers on the rail. “Salishan to Straker.”

“Straker here.”

“Sir, the wormhole will take us in a few minutes. It occurs to me we could salvo shipkillers into it a few seconds before, and the... the *butterfly collector* as Zaxby calls it might get a nasty surprise that will cover our emergence. We could also deploy the three skimmers and *Redwolf* into our wake, so they’d be able to operate independently. Worst case, they might be able to get away to report our fate.”

“That’s what black box drones are for... but I take your point. The big question is, do we initiate hostilities, or hope for something non-belligerent on the other end?”

“That’s a question for your pay grade, sir, not mine.”

Straker’s voice was dry. “Since I’m here, right. No to the first, yes to the second. No salvo, but let’s get the skimmers and *Redwolf* into space and trailing us. Small craft too, at your discretion, with crews of your choosing. Zaxby can skipper *Redwolf*. We’ll be ready to fight, but I don’t want to start one. I’m getting the feeling we’re like a tiger cub about to be picked up by zookeepers. All biting their hands will do is piss them off.”

“Understood.” She issued the orders.

Closer and closer the wormhole approached, growing as it neared the now-drifting *Trollheim*, which faced its nemesis prow-on. With no more reason to evade, the crew concentrated on preparation for battle. *Redwolf* and the three skimmers now floated astern of the dreadnought, but Salishan had decided not to launch her small craft—shuttles, pinnaces, grabships and so on. Yet those were ready and waiting on the flight decks. Missiles were loaded in tubes, and every operating weapon was charged and ready.

The nothingness grew to fill the forward viewscreen, a circle of black blotting out the glowing background of the nebula. Behind the wormhole, the baleful, powerful singularity controlled and projected it, like a man with a pitiless spotlight.

What could mere humans do in the face of such power? Had it been stupid and foolish to go where all available information warned of deadly danger? With a confident General Straker leading them, she and the other

Breakers believed they could handle anything—but here was something beyond their experience and ability. The feeling of helplessness and insignificance was torture far worse than any injury.

Yet they had collapsed one wormhole. The butterfly collectors were not gods, any more than a zookeeper was invulnerable to a dangerous animal.

She held these hopes in mind as the wormhole swallowed the ship.

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Chapter 26

Hell's Reach, aboard *Cassiel*.

"What in the hell is that?" Loco asked, reaching across the cockpit to snatch the tiny tube from Chiara's hand. He sniffed it, smelling that familiar herbal aroma, the aroma he'd thought was from her tea.

"Erb. Pure Erbaccia extract."

Horror flooded his gut. "We have hundreds of liters of that crap with us! You're an addict—and now you have all you want? My God, Chiara!"

She rolled her eyes. "Come on, Loco, think. I *always* had all I wanted. My people *grow* the stuff. Of course a lot of them use it—have used it for years, to cope with their misery and their captivity under the Korveni. Even unprocessed, you can chew the plant. The Korveni encouraged it, to control them, just like oppressors have always done. Bread and circuses, right? On Old Earth it happened all the time."

"But Chiara, you're..."

"Different?" Her laugh was bitter. "You can take the girl out of her Contract, but you can't take the Contractor way of thinking out of the girl."

Loco tried not to show how appalled he was. "Does Belinda use Erb too?"

"Of course. Most ex-Contractors end up as addicts, of drugs far worse than Erb. Actually, she made the transition to Erb better than I did. Good thing I have plenty. She'd have died without it."

"You need to get off the stuff, Chi. You're not a Contractor anymore—and neither is Bel."

Chiara shook her head slowly. "We always will be, in our own heads. The best we can do is live with it, manage it... make the best of it."

Loco's mind whirled with the shock, but he pushed it aside with long practice as a proximity alarm alerted him to their approach to the wormhole. "Slow us down."

Chiara backed the throttles. "Slowing to relative rest."

Loco sighed. "Maybe Mara can help you get clean, when we get back."

"Maybe..."

"You should have said something about this long ago."

"You... you'd have looked at me like you're looking at me now. I couldn't take that."

He breathed deeply. "I get it. But when we get home, we're talking to Mara. Doctor-patient confidentiality and all that, okay? I bet she can fix you right up, cure all your addictions. Maybe with her fancy rejuvenation tank."

"You have more faith than I do."

"Hope is more like it. But yeah, I have faith in Mara. She's amazing. We have amazing people in the Breakers. We're go-getters and problem solvers. We're not perfect, but we don't give up—on anyone. Least of all the people we love."

"Love ain't some magic formula." Chiara snorted and turned away, deflated. "I can't handle this anymore. I can't be in charge. I just can't."

Loco took a long moment to consider. Her addiction pushed his decision over the edge. "Okay. I'll take over command. But we don't tell anyone that explicitly. They'll figure it out soon enough, but it's better that it seems like a natural change."

"Okay. Whatever."

He handed her back the tube. "And minimize this, okay? Just enough to keep you from withdrawal. That's the deal, and it's an order, since I'm in charge now."

"Aye aye, sir." She saluted awkwardly, with her left hand, and she blinked, holding back tears.

Loco stood. "Stand by. I need to talk to the crew about this wormhole." He hoped she wouldn't use more as soon as he left the room. Yet he couldn't police her. That would never work.

In the hold, he put Chiara out of his mind and gathered everyone else. "Listen up, people. We're about to enter a wormhole. I have no idea what that means. Nobody I know has ever done it. I read about some experiments where they sent small probes through wormholes without damage. Our information says we have to go through it, and the captain and I both think this info is genuine and not a trap. The route info has been correct so far. We also don't know if our rock buddies will follow us through, and we have no clue what's on the other side, except that it's some kind of Axis of Predators base or facility. In short..." He stopped, finding it hard to say the next words.

"In short, it's a suicide mission, right sir?" Spacer Richards blurted out. "Sorry, I mean..."

"Belay that," Chief Sylvester snarled at his crewman before turning to Loco. "Sir, we're here to get our people back. If you say this is what it

takes, we don't care how dangerous it is. We don't leave Breakers in captivity."

"Thank you. Both of you, gentlemen, for your honest opinions. If I thought it was a suicide mission I wouldn't order it, but it is extremely dangerous. If we truly can't handle what's on the other side, we'll run like scalded dogs and get a real fleet, then come back and smash these motherfuckers. But that will be my decision, my responsibility. Running would be humiliating, but remember, General Straker is also looking for them. Hell, he might already be there, might have rescued them."

That brought a guarded cheer.

"Richards, you still chatting with the Lithoids?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ask them if they've been through the wormhole before."

Richards tapped at his terminal. "No, sir. They have no idea."

"Tell them we're going through. If they want to come along, we'd be happy to have them. If not, thanks and goodbye for now."

"They want to come along."

"Good. They're our only ace in the hole. So, gents, hit the head one last time, eat a ration bar, take a drink, and suit up. We're going through in ten minutes."

When Loco returned to the cockpit it was like stepping back into a different world—from the clear military environment of the Breakers to the muddy fog of a human relationship. Why couldn't women be simple, like men? And why did it happen that he finally found his soul mate, but she was so... messed up?

If there really was a God, he sure had a devilish sense of humor.

"The Breakers will be ready," Loco told her. "You good?"

"I'm fine." Chiara lifted her caff. "Drugged and ready."

"Then start moving in. I told them ten minutes to entry."

She waggled her eyebrows. "Aye aye, Captain sir."

"Please stop that," he said.

"Okay, okay. We're on our way. The rocks seem to be coming along."

"Good."

In fact, the rocks englobed them completely in a loose protective sphere, like thirteen Lithomorphic sheepdogs guarding one injured lamb. Maybe that was part of their personality—they were pack creatures, both internally

and externally. Each was composed of a pack of rocks, and they formed an uber-pack of Lithoids. *Cassiel* had been adopted as part of their pack.

Loco wondered how they reproduced. Did they mate, mix their substance, and then create little rock groups, connected by new electromagnetic networks? Or did one divide into two, like bacteria, or Thorians?

The first Lithoid ahead entered the black sphere and vanished, then three more, and then it was *Cassiel*'s turn. There was no sensation of acceleration or motion, no feeling of time passing, before they exited the other end.

Chiara turned and accelerated the ship before the sensors had even populated the screens with information. The rocks moved with the ship, seemingly unperturbed by the passage through the wormhole. It was, in fact, more ordinary than a sidespace transit, like nothing had happened at all, as if they'd merely slipped through a dark curtain. Soon, the main screen showed a small moon or planetoid, about an hour's travel away.

Loco worked the sensors. "We're getting ship signs... hundreds, maybe thousands. Mostly small craft, but some large ships too. No positive transponders, but they look like Arattak, Korven, Dusics... Crocs... Vulps... A few others I can't identify. Axis of Predators, all right."

"Any ships near us?"

"Not yet—oh shit, yes there are." Suddenly, eight drive emissions sprang up. "Dammit, they were EMCON, probably guarding this end of the wormhole. Croc frigates, by the look of them."

Chiara turned the ship to put the enemies astern and shoved the throttles to their stops. "I'm heading back into the wormhole. We can't handle eight Crocs—or all those others near the planetoid."

Loco could see the Crocs—crewed by a reptilian race resembling the crocodiles they were nicknamed for—were turning tightly and lining up on the *Cassiel*. "Gods, they're fast in a sprint. They'll catch us before we get away." He activated the intercom. "Richards, tell our rock buddies we're running, and to please cover our asses."

"Aye aye, sir."

In answer to the humans' plea, Lithoids fell back to cover *Cassiel*. The Crocs launched missiles, which the rock-beings easily shot out of space with their electrical discharges. In response, the Crocs fired beams and blew several rocks apart from one Lithoid.

That turned out to be a mistake. The Lithoids, enraged, rushed to protect their wounded comrade. Like a swarm of wasps they converged—many of them losing more rocks in the process, which didn't seem to matter. They smashed themselves into the Croc frigates, ripping them apart in titanic discharges of kinetic and electrical energy. Within a minute, all the enemy ships were battered to hulks.

"Gods and monsters," Loco said, awed. "I'm glad they're on our side."

The rocks sorted themselves out into groups, twelve of them. Try as he might, Loco couldn't detect a thirteenth group. "I think they lost a guy," he said hollowly.

Without knocking, Richards burst into the cockpit, terminal in one hand. "Sir, ma'am—did you see that?"

"We did."

"Those bastards killed one of the rocks, and they're royally pissed, sir. What should I say?"

"Tell them we sympathize with their loss," Loco said, "and thank them for protecting us."

"They want to attack. Are we going to attack? I bet the Lithoids could clean these guys' clocks!"

"The score is eight to one, Richards." Loco pointed at the main screen. "There are hundreds of enemy vessels out there near that base, and some much bigger than frigates. What do you think about that math?"

The young man's face fell. "Not good. I understand, sir. What are we going to do?"

"For now, urge them to stay with us. Tell them we're angry too, but it makes no sense to die needlessly."

"Get back here, Richards," Sylvester roared from behind. "Quit bothering the bosses."

"Sorry, sir. Ma'am." Richards withdrew, shutting the cockpit door.

"It's a good question, though," Chiara said. "What are we going to do?"

"We're safe from immediate threats," Loco replied, double-checking the sensors. "Unless there are more lying doggo. Looks like about forty ships are heading our way, though, and some are heavy cruisers. We'll gather as much intel as we can, then run back through the wormhole ahead of the posse."

"And that's that. Dead end."

“For now. We can’t fight them all, not even with our rocks—and we can’t ask the rocks to die for our cause.”

“Too bad we don’t have a bunch more Lithoids,” Chiara mused.

Loco cocked his head at her. “They said they’re lost. If we could lead these to rejoin their people, we could make friends, become allies against the Axis.”

“That could take weeks, months—years maybe.”

“Yeah. Better to run home and get the fleet, though even the entire Breakers contingent would be outnumbered and outgunned. And it means no immediate rescue for the six Breakers they kidnapped.”

“I know.” Chiara leaned over to put a hand on Loco’s neck, fingers twining with his short black hair. “It feels like a knife in the gut, running away. But what else can we do?”

“Nothing.” Loco stared bleakly at the console. “If Derek were here, he’d come up with some impossible plan and make it work anyway.”

“You can’t compare yourself with a legend, Loco. Besides, I don’t think even our great Liberator could do better than we did. We found the bastards’ base, and whatever they’re doing, they’re up to no good. That’s a win, and far more than I ever expected. Let’s get back and tell someone.”

The reverse transit through the wormhole again seemed to be no more than stepping through a door. What Loco didn’t expect was what waited at the other end.

At the new end, he corrected himself... because where they arrived wasn’t where they’d started from.

The sensors showed *Cassiel* now sailed within a vast sphere of relatively empty space, bounded by the glowing gas of the nebula, but pushed outward, perhaps by the stellar wind of the bright white star in the center. Within this bubble orbited a bewildering array of objects ranging from full-fledged gas giants and their moons, through more ordinary planets, with and without atmosphere, down to small black holes attached to wormholes—scores of them.

Within and among these many hundreds of objects swirled living creatures by the thousands—energy signatures and vortexes, things like the jellyfish or plankton they’d encountered, larger creatures that cruised in stately herds like whales among floes of icy comets near the boundary—more than they could categorize or take in. None were exactly like what

they'd encountered before, but Loco was starting to see that nebula life fell into categories.

"Oh, shit," he breathed as he took it in. "What do we do now?"

Chiara pointed. "Maybe we try to talk to *them*."

"Lithoids!" The signatures were clear. Hundreds of groups of the rocks, many much larger and more numerous than the ones accompanying the ship, converged on *Cassiel* and her escorting rocks. They danced and swirled among their fellows, joyously firing lightings from chunk to chunk like a summer storm in the desert.

Richards burst into the cockpit once more, followed by Sylvester and others crowding behind. "Sir! Sir! It's their people! The Lithoids!"

"I got that feeling, Spacer," Loco said dryly, "and that's great... but what we could really use is information about this place—and how to get out. The wormhole we expected to take us back along our path instead took us here. That means something can change the connections between wormholes—which means something's controlling them—like a network. Do the Lithoids control the wormhole network, or is there some other race or intelligence in charge? And how do we get home? We need to know."

Richards' face fell. "Yeah, right. I'll try to find out."

"You do that."

Chief Sylvester put a hand on Richards' shoulder to guide him back toward his station. "He's a good kid; just a little excitable, sir."

"No problem, Chief. We need to keep the big picture in mind, though. We only have a few more days of oxygen and supplies. I don't want to be reduced to trial and error by flying through random wormholes, or having to land on one of the green planets here just to survive. We're Breakers, and we have a mission."

"Aye aye, sir. I'll keep Richards pushing for the information we need." Sylvester departed.

"What do we do until then?" Chiara asked. "I'm getting really tired of this watch-and-watch in the cockpit. I need eight or ten uninterrupted hours of sleep."

Due to his genetic engineering, Loco never needed as much sleep as normals did, but he could sympathize. "We don't have any pilots among our Breakers, but the junior noncoms could stand cockpit watches. Things look safe enough for the moment, with our Lithoids all around us. Let's take a break and get you to bed."

Chiara stood and smiled weakly. “No candy bar though. I’m exhausted.”
“Huh?” Loco asked.

“Candy bar,” she said suggestively. “It means a quickie—a quick treat, you know?”

“Never heard that one.”

“Never mind. Old cinevid reference.”

After issuing instructions to the chief, Loco helped Chiara into bed and held her for the minute or two it took her to fall deeply asleep. A tiny snore drifted from her nostrils, and he gazed down at her with confused affection.

Candy bar. He’d heard it differently, before: a nickname for a certain kind of woman—half sweet, half nuts.

“You’re my candy bar,” he whispered before kissing her forehead and stretching out next to her for a catnap.

Loco awoke in an hour. Refreshed, he ate, and then checked on the situation.

“The Lithoids have moved off now,” Richards explained as he sat at his terminal in the hold. “They’re still within comms range, but they’re leaving us alone.”

“Lost interest?”

“They’re still answering if I say something, but it looks like they’re, I dunno, feeding maybe? Moving in closer to the star, sucking up stray rocks...”

“Well, no reason to think it would last,” Loco said.

“The bigger Lithoids are much more intelligent than ours,” Richards continued. “I think they’re the parents and our guys were, I dunno, like a litter of puppies that decided to go off and play. They blundered through a wormhole and by the time the parents went looking, they were lost. The wormhole had changed destination. Then they grew up some, but without parents to educate them they were like... kids lost in the woods for all their lives.”

Loco pondered. “So that means the Lithoids don’t control the wormholes... and it seems like they can’t talk to whoever does.”

“Yes, sir,” Richards said, “otherwise they’d have asked where their kids went. They say the wormholes change their connections without warning—though once one changes, it’s usually a while before it changes again. The Lithoids are pretty smart. The grown-up ones, I mean. They have a fairly complex recon system where they send through a single rock—like part of

one of them—with orders to turn around and come back right away. One rock by itself is pretty stupid, but it can see and remember things, so it's like a probe. This way, they have corporate knowledge of where all the wormholes go.”

“They know where the other ends are?”

“More or less. Sometimes they can tell their position within the nebula. Sometimes they can only guess, based on what they see—and sometimes they go somewhere new.”

“Always within the nebula?” Loco asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“But this nebula is light-years across. If I remember my cosmology theory, wormholes don't move things FTL. Does that line up with the Lithoids' observations?”

“Let me ask.” Richards typed questions into his terminal.

The answers Loco could read over his shoulder were full-fledged and comprehensible now, though still run through the translation program and turned into universal machine code for the Lithoids' benefit.

“They say travel through these wormholes is instantaneous, no matter how far.”

Loco's jaw slackened in surprise. “Wow. I wish Zaxby or Murdock were here. They'd go nuts. Instant FTL! Stargates, like in science fiction! If we could control them... My God, what we couldn't do with it.”

“Or what the Predators could do with them...” Richards said.

“Bite your tongue, kid. But you're right. This makes it doubly important we shut down whatever the Axis is doing, before they figure out how to access the wormhole network. Let's hope there *is* some kind of intelligence controlling it, something that will defend itself. Or that wormholes are random, uncontrollable phenomena.”

“Yes, sir.”

Chief Sylvester cleared his throat. “We got another problem, sir. We lost one of the big oxygen generators to the barracuda attack. The scrubbers are still good, but in about a day and a half we'll start having some problems. Even if we solve the oxygen problem, we'll soon be out of water, and then food. We really need to find our way out of here.”

“Maybe not, Chief,” the cockpit watchstander said from the doorway. “I just picked up a signal. An incoming message.”

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Chapter 27

Hell's Reach, SBS *Trollheim*.

Straker stepped onto the bridge as the implacable wormhole swallowed the dreadnought. He instinctively braced himself against the bulkhead, anticipating a disaster that didn't come.

Not yet, anyway.

The holotank showed *Trollheim* arriving near a bright white star. The nebula surrounded the system—presumably the Hellheim nebula, rather than some other—but the space within the star system was clear, a relief from the usual obscuring gas. Dozens, hundreds, then thousands of objects appeared within the display as the sensors and the SAI sorted out the readings—singularities with wormholes attached, planets of all sizes and types with their attendant moons, and planetoids ranging from tiny to respectable-sized. To Straker's practiced eye, they were far too close to each other. Gravity interactions alone should have long ago turned this order into chaos before eventually finding natural stability.

This was far from natural.

Among these thousands of objects swirled living creatures, thousands, perhaps millions of them. There were too many to show individually, and the SAI struggled to sort them into groupings and categorize them.

"The science team's going to be busy," Straker said, arms crossed and gazing speculatively at the sophisticated display.

"Busy with the right things, I'll make sure," Salishan replied. "Threat assessments, not brainiac fun. Comms, pass the word to the science team: focus on threats, mission-essential tasks, and report all findings to Intelligence. Commander Sinden to task the science team as needed."

"Aye aye."

"Sensors, I need your initial findings ASAP."

"Working them up now, ma'am." The sensors officer and her assistant scrambled to pull meaning from the overwhelming flood of data. "No immediate threats detected. Several dangerous life-form types within two hours' travel. Wormholes with their singularities, plotting now... These are obvious hazards. In fact, the one generating this end of our wormhole is at close range." Icons flashed and turned colors to illustrate her words.

Salishan raised her voice. "Helm, take us away from the nearest singularity, impellers only."

"Aye aye, ma'am."

"Stand down from battle stations. Maintain Alert Two."

"Alert Two, aye."

"Ma'am, secure comlink from Zaxby aboard *Redwolf*," Comms said.

"Put him on."

"Zaxby here. General Straker, this system is entirely artificial."

"Yes," Straker said mildly. "Even we neurotypical simpletons can see that."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, sir," Zaxby said. "Your limitations are not your fault. You are a designed being, sadly manipulated as a child, who rose above his circumstances to—"

Straker overrode him. "Do you have some useful information for us?"

"Yes. The star is highly anomalous. In fact, I'd go so far as to say it's impossible."

"And yet, there it is."

"Impossible in its apparent configuration. White stars are naturally young, large, and extremely hot. This one is about the size of common yellow G type, typified by Old Earth's sun, and is far cooler. If not for its spectral emissions, I'd call it a red dwarf."

"Aren't there white dwarfs?"

"Yes, but those are old and tiny, barely larger than an ordinary solid planet, and extremely dense. As I said, this one is diffuse and cool—so cool that a properly equipped ship could fly into and out of its corona without damage—rather like a red giant. The point is, this star should not exist in its current configuration. Ergo, it is artificial, or has been altered in some way. Add to that the forty-six singularities I've so far charted and the behavior of the wormhole that brought us here, and I must posit that this is a controlled and engineered star system."

"So where are the engineers?" Straker asked. "Are they the butterfly collectors? The ones who brought us here?"

"That's the fundamental question, isn't it?" Zaxby asked, lighting up. "I have a theory—more of a conjecture, really, but given the clue I provided, even you should be able to intuit its essence."

Straker pondered his words and hoped he wasn't about to experience another lecture. "You think the engineers might live *inside* the star?"

“First prize for Derek Straker. It’s certainly possible. An intelligence that can manipulate singularities and create wormholes on demand could certainly take up residence inside a cool star. It could be highly advantageous—for concealment, for defense, for its abundant energy. Perhaps the engineers simply find it hospitable. Perhaps they are as comfortable in high-temperature environments as Thorians are in high-radiation environments.”

“That’s all very interesting, Zaxby, but we’re on a mission. Use that big brain of yours to find us a way to the Predator base.”

“I strongly suspect whoever built and maintains this system knows how to get there, via these wormholes. If it—or they—are inside that star...”

Irrational hope surged suddenly through Straker. “I need to talk to them.”

“We don’t know if there is anything to talk to. My ideas are merely a hypothesis.”

“Can Roentgen see anything within the star?”

“In fact, it was he who pointed out the initial anomaly: too many neutrinos. He suspects neutrino beams from the star are being used to control the singularities, rather like we use tightbeam laser comms.”

“What if he takes up a position between the star and a singularity? Could he intercept the neutrino beam, try to see what it’s saying?”

“As usual, your mind lags behind mine. Observe: the *Redwolf* is already taking up such a position.”

The holotank confirmed what Zaxby said. The yacht had moved off to place herself between the star and the nearest singularity, the one attached to the wormhole from which they arrived.

“Roentgen reports neutrino increases. He says there’s a modulated beam, implying it contains information. We will work on deciphering it. It may take some time.”

“Get working. Straker out.” He turned back to the holotank display, which continued to acquire detail as data arrived and was processed.

“Straker to Sinden.”

“Sinden here.”

“Anything I need to know?”

“Operationally, no, sir. I’ll report significant findings via the Intel watchstander on the bridge, and urgent matters directly, as usual.”

“Of course, Nancy,” Straker said. “Thanks.”

“Sir, when you get a free moment, could you stop by the Intel spaces? Nothing urgent—perhaps when next you make rounds?” Her voice seemed studiously casual.

That was an unusual request for Sindén. Normally the tightly wound, highly efficient intelligence officer kept to the usual, formal channels. Still, there were always undercurrents on a crowded ship with more than a thousand people aboard. Maybe this was something like that—like Gurung’s extra people and their “recreational activities,” or Mara’s usurping the infirmary from the ship’s appointed doctor, or Zaxby and his ad-hoc, add-on laboratory activities.

“Sure. I’ll make a note.” Straker tapped a reminder into his handtab, and then began to pace. He wanted to order the ship to go somewhere, to continue the mission, but he had no idea where to go. The wormhole had brought them here and no disaster had ensued. Repairs continued from the damaging attempt to avoid the inevitable, so it wasn’t as if time was being lost—except for those in Korven captivity.

For Carla.

Did it make any sense to try to return through the same wormhole? Probably not. The star-dwelling engineers—as evidenced by the neutrino beam—wanted *Trollheim* here. Why? To add to their butterfly menagerie? The individual types of life identified by the SAI and science team looked to be in the hundreds already, and the numbers were climbing fast.

“Any evidence of other artificial ships here?” he called to no one in particular. “Habs? Constructs other than the wormholes?”

An icon flashed among the many in the holotank, and the sensors officer spoke up. “This one might be a ship. Refined metals, conventional shape. No power signature or emissions, though, sir.”

“Pass the word for one of our skimmers to go take a look.”

“Aye aye, sir.” Comms relayed the orders. Soon, one of the three Ruxin-crewed skimmers—the *Teredo*—shot away.

Within minutes, they confirmed a ship of unknown type, conventional in size and configuration, likely a military frigate. Apparently it was old and had been here for decades, perhaps centuries.

“Send in a recon team,” Straker ordered.

Soon, the Ruxin team explored a ship long dead, with no power and perhaps a hundred mummified three-armed aliens. “It looks as if they opened their airlocks and committed suicide,” the Ruxin skimmer

commander reported. “Very strange, considering that several life-bearing worlds are present here in this system.”

“Thanks, Lieutenant. Any chance of restarting or salvaging the ship?”

“Unlikely. We will investigate further and let you know, sir.”

“Roger that. Straker out.” He turned toward Sensors. “Any emissions from the life-bearing planets?”

“No EM emissions from any of the three, sir. Initial atmospheric tracing shows hydrocarbon burning—coal and petroleum perhaps—but no radio.”

“So if there’s any sentient life there, it’s primitive.”

“Or technologically regressed,” Salishan suggested. “If ships are brought here and can’t get away, they might set down in order to survive. Eventually, the high-tech machines stop working, generations pass...”

“Or the butterfly collectors mess with them, take away their tech.”

“Hasn’t happened with us, yet, sir.”

“We don’t know how fast they operate. Maybe they move slowly, deliberately. Imagine amoral creatures who view everyone else as things to be studied or played with. Who knows what they might do?”

Salishan said nothing, merely shook her head.

Sensors spoke suddenly, excitedly. “Bogey, extreme range, small ship with standard EM signature. Ma’am, database match to *Cassiel*!”

“*Cassiel*? Jilani’s ship?” Salishan asked.

“That’s what the SAI says.”

“Comlink them!” Straker barked.

“They’re more than five light-minutes away, sir, and they don’t have FTL comms.”

“Of course. Send them a message, standard Breaker channel and encryption. Give them a SITREP, request one from them, and ask them to join us. Captain Salishan—”

“Helm,” Salishan said, “set course to rendezvous with *Cassiel*, one quarter acceleration. Comms, inform our squadron. Pass to *Bankia*”—that was another skimmer—“to scout ahead and intercept *Cassiel*. Confirm identity and render aid if needed.”

The officers murmured their *aye-ayes* and executed the orders.

Almost forty minutes passed before the expected return message from *Cassiel*. It was Loco’s welcome image on the vid. “Well, well, well. Fancy meeting you here, boss.” He buffed his nails theatrically and grinned.

“Wondered when you’d show up. You must be slipping.” He chuckled and

sat forward in the cockpit view. “Seriously, we’re really glad to see you. Our ship could use repairs and supplies. We rescued eleven Breaker men from forced labor in a rhodium mine, and we have them aboard. They’re camping in our hold, and frankly, they’re starting to stink.”

The bridge personnel applauded and let out a cheer, and several watchstanders whispered into their comlinks, passing the scuttlebutt to the rest of the crew.

The message continued. “Our information led us to believe Carla and the other women are being held here in Hell’s Reach. You should be receiving a data file alongside this message with everything we know. See you soon.” Loco saluted casually. “Loco out.”

Straker let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. “Great news.”

Salishan sidled up next to him and spoke quietly. “Embarrassing. They did more to rescue our people, and faster than we did.”

“A battle and a new political alliance got in our way,” he replied quietly. “Still, it does point out the value of small teams. It occurs to me we should establish a Breakers covert operations division, with personnel who can blend in with civilians, gather intel and perform special missions.”

“If you’re asking my opinion, I’m all for it. If you’re offering it to me, no thanks.”

“No, I was thinking of Loco, and Jilani if she wants to join in. We’ve got plenty of outstanding regular military officers, but special ops and spying require a different mindset.”

“Each to their own.”

“Precisely.” He swallowed. “Good news about the Breaker men.”

“Flip side, bad news about the women. You think that’s significant?”

“I really don’t want to think about it, but I have to, Mercy. Why do you think they separated them like that? Why the women?”

“If the enemy were humanoid, I’d think it was the same old story—sex trafficking. But I wouldn’t figure the Predators would care. Korven violently and indiscriminately implant any oxygen-breathing organics. Arattak and Dusics are immune to nearly all poisons and will drink most body fluids. The Vulps and Crocs are carnivorous. Maybe they think woman-flesh is tastier?”

Straker made a face, and then stepped over to Comms. “Link to Doctor Straker.”

A moment later: “Mara here, Derek.”

“Loco and Jilani are in-system with some rescued Breaker prisoners—all men. We’ll pick them up soon. He sent data. Take a look, interview Loco and the Breakers when they get here, and try to figure out why they separated out our women and sent them to Hell’s Reach instead of selling them off like they did the men. There must be a reason.”

“On it.” The comlink dropped.

No doubt the news was rippling around the ship now. Once again his nerves sang with the frustrated desire to do something, smash something, kill something.

“Mercy, can we speed up the pickup?”

“If we want to burn double fuel, twice. Remember, more acceleration means more deceleration.”

Straker ground his teeth and told himself to quit micromanaging. “How long?”

“Ninety minutes, more or less, as they’re heading toward us at higher speed than we’re heading toward them. *Cassiel* is pretty fast.”

“Fine. I’m going to make rounds, get in a workout, a meal, maybe a nap... you good for now, Captain?”

Salishan nodded. “We all have the Bug now, sir. We don’t need much sleep. And one nice thing about being the captain: unlimited food delivery, straight to the bridge.”

“I’ll be on comlink.” Straker left. He checked his handtab to see which areas he hadn’t visited lately, reminding him of... oh yeah, Sinden wanted to see him. He dropped by a couple of the maintenance shops, marked them off his list, and then headed over to Intelligence.

The Intel shop was bustling. It looked like Sinden had brought every specialist she could cram aboard. The nearest few shot to their feet and took deep breaths to announce *Flag on deck* but Straker waved them down. “At ease, carry on.”

Commander Sinden stepped out of her tiny office and waited for him to wend his way through the people and stations. Inside, she shut the door and gestured for him to sit in the lone extra chair. Once they were seated, she activated a broad-spectrum portable jammer.

Straker’s eyebrows rose. “You worried about someone spying on us here?”

Sinden ran her hands through her short blonde bob and sighed. “Zaxby spies on everyone, and if he can do it, others might too. Even this jammer

isn't foolproof. The Thorian can see nearly the entire EM spectrum, including X-rays and exotic particles. That means he can see through walls."

"He's off the ship—and I trust him."

"Trust his intentions, sir, but I'm sure Zaxby could trick him into spying for him anyway."

"So it's Zaxby you're worried about? Some specific reason?"

"Not until recently. Generally, he's a Breaker, but only on-again, off-again. He has too many political and economic ties to Ruxin and elsewhere not to have conflicts of interest. That's one reason I keep a close eye on him. Also, he takes far too many liberties with his orders. That's another. I've always overlooked his activities until now, but... "

"But... you said recently?"

She seemed to have difficulty starting her next sentence. "Sir, this is extremely awkward."

"I can see that, but it's okay, Nancy. Whatever's going on, I'll give it due consideration and not act hastily. I know Zaxby plays fast and loose with orders, and you're exactly the opposite. Both approaches have their advantages. You think Zaxby's gone too far in some way?"

Sinden nodded in relief. "I do. Of course, it's up to you to judge, but I can't stay silent in this case."

"Go on. It's just you and me here, and we've known each other since childhood."

"That's just it, sir. Maybe we haven't."

That made no sense to Straker. "What's that mean?"

"If I told you, you'd think I was insane. I have to show you. With Zaxby off the ship, it's the perfect time. And sir... it involves your sister."

"Mara? What about her?"

"She's working with Zaxby on something... has been for a long time, it seems, ever since the Hive and Crystal wars. Ever since they got ahold of that alien tech, the Mindspark device, and made the rejuvenation tanks. The subquantum reorganization J-tech that's come out of it is revolutionary, and it's leading them far beyond the frontiers of what's ethical, even moral. Like the golems."

Straker frowned. He wasn't getting it. "That was a one-time thing."

"What's done once can be done again—and it gets easier each time."

“If I remember a few Nancy Sinden quotes correctly, you were never very concerned with morals and ethics, as long as you got the job done.”

“My thinking has evolved, sir. I’ve performed a deep analysis of all major moral and ethical systems—in theory, in practice, and in outcomes—and have concluded that no sentient society can long prosper without firm ethical foundations. I’ve therefore synthesized my own ethical code from all the most effective sources, and have pledged myself to live by its principles. It’s the rational thing to do, for the greater good.”

Straker suppressed his amusement at her earnest declarations. It was a common failing of brainiacs that they thought of life as a problem to be solved, and once they thought they had, they saw everything through that lens. Put another way, when they invented a hammer, everything became a nail.

“You’re still young, and I’m sure your thinking will continue to evolve. That’s good. So, what part of your code has been violated to the point that you have to tell me in secret?”

“As I said, sir, I have to show you, and the answer will become clear.” She stood and strapped on her sidearm. “Please come with me to Zaxby’s lab. Could you have Steiner and several armed marines join us there? And a laser team, just in case we need to cut something open.”

“Sure.” He hid his astonishment. “Let’s go.”

On the way, he comlinked Steiner and told him to bring six armed marines and a cutting team to his location, deliberately not mentioning Zaxby’s lab. Whatever this was, Sinden seemed to want to keep it hush-hush. Steiner would use the ship’s SAI to track Straker’s comlink and rendezvous with him—which would happen to be outside the lab.

Halfway there, with Sinden leading him nervously through crowded corridors, klaxons whooped and the public announcement system spoke in the SAI’s piercing voice.

“Alert Condition One. Battle Stations. General Straker to the bridge. Alert Condition One. Battle Stations. General Straker to the Bridge.”

Chapter 28

Hell's Reach, SBS *Trollheim*.

"Sorry, Commander, this will have to wait," Straker bellowed to Sinden over the din of the SAI announcing Battle Stations, and then turned toward the bridge. He shoved in his comlink and acknowledged.

"Aye aye, sir," Sinden yelled and backtracked toward Intelligence.

His comlink beeped. "Steiner here, sir. You still need us and the cutters?"

"Not now. I'll let you know. Straker out. Straker to Salishan. What's happening?"

"Enemy ships emerging from a wormhole, fleet strength."

"On my way."

On the bridge, the main screen showed a view of a wormhole, with at least thirty ships nearby and more arriving. The holotank reflected the same, identifying the wormhole as the one from which *Cassiel* had emerged.

"Sir, those ships are chasing *Cassiel*. They're a mix of Predators ranging up to heavy cruisers. No DNs yet, but as it stands, we're far behind in combat power."

"Will they catch *Cassiel*?"

"No, but the four shipkillers chasing them might. I've already ordered our two available skimmers ahead, recalled *Teredo*, notified *Redwolf*, and we're at Condition One. I've also launched a spread of six shipkillers under positive control. We can use them as antimissiles if we have to. *Expensive* antimissiles."

"I'm aware of the equities involved," he said dryly. "Hell of a way to fight a battle, always worrying about how much things cost."

"I'm not concerned about the money, sir. It's running out of expendables with no resupply available that worries me."

"Understood. What's the timeline look like?"

"Fifteen minutes to shipkiller intercept. Twenty-five minutes to our rendezvous. Those ten minutes represent the danger window, and no, we can't cut that window. If we accelerate more, we'll shoot past *Cassiel*. If we do, we'll either have to turn and burn huge amounts of fuel, presenting our stern to be raked, or we'll have to make a firing pass through the enemy

formation. We'll hurt them bad, but they'll hurt us worse. Trust me on the tactics."

"I do."

"The skimmers will get there first. The sims say they should be able to destroy the shipkillers, ninety percent."

"Seems like you've got everything covered."

Salishan shot him a glance. "I've tried, sir. You see something else?"

"No. Only, we've never fought the Dusics, Crocs or Vulps. We can't assume we know everything about their tactics or tech. No battle plan survives contact with the enemy."

"Commander Sinden has provided briefings on what we do know... but yes, sir, I take your meaning." She sighed. "Here's a case where true fighter craft would come in handy. I know they're mostly useless for fleet engagements, which is why carriers became obsolete, but right now we could use some speedy, heavily armed attack craft."

"Like the anti-Opter cutters?"

Salishan snapped her fingers. "Exactly."

"We'll put them on the wish list."

Straker paced and Salishan drummed her fingers on the arm of her captain's chair as the minutes ticked by. The tension rose as the enemy shipkillers neared the fleeing *Cassiel*.

The two leading skimmers began firing beams at their long range, trying to pick off the six enemy missiles—which began random evasion patterns, jinking and twisting while still following Jilani's sloop. One of the missiles disappeared and a cheer rose from the watchstanders—until suddenly there were eleven missiles showing in the holotank.

"Decoys," Salishan said, slamming her hand on her armrest as she stood to join Straker at the holotank, staring fiercely at it as if to influence the battle by sheer will. "One of them was a decoy pack. Or possibly a multi-pack with conventional warheads. Split into six, looks like."

Straker refrained from an *I-told-you-so*. "Chances now?"

"I'd say fifty-fifty," Salishan said. "Weapons, give me a sim run."

After a moment the weapons officer had an answer. "Fifty-nine percent positive."

"With our shipkillers included?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Salishan swore in her ancestral tongue. “Message to *Bankia* and *Midiya*. All weapons free, expendables authorized.”

“What’s that?” Straker asked, squinting at the holotank. “Zoom in.”

“*Redwolf*. Gods and monsters, she’s fast. She’ll actually beat the missiles to the intercept.”

“That yacht is Murdock’s baby. She’s over-teched with everything he could load into her.”

“I wonder how much money he spent.”

Straker glanced sharply at Salishan. “Good question—for Colonel Keller, for later. For now, I hope he spent enough to save their lives.”

A shipkiller—or a decoy, there was no way to tell—winked out, then another, as the skimmers continued to fire. Closer and closer the icons grew, and the holotank zoomed in further and further to keep them separated in the view. Another winked out, then another, and then the display whited for a moment.

“Our shipkillers,” Salishan stated, arms crossed and waiting for the blasts to clear from the EM overload. When they could see again, three missiles still closed on Cassiel.

One of the skimmers—*Bankia*—lined up on a missile and charged directly at it. “What’s he doing?” Straker asked.

“Not sure. I hope he’s not sacrificing his ship... ”

The skimmer and missile merged in a tremendous explosion.

“Great Creator... what the hell?” Straker pounded the rail. “Damned stupid heroic Ruxin war males. Zaxby better not have ordered his people to —”

“Look!” Salishan pointed. *Bankia* appeared beyond the remaining two missiles, clawing into a tight turn. “Underspace!”

“Of course,” Straker said. “Must’ve dropped a mine in the missile’s path and skimmed under. Fine timing.”

“Put that skimmer captain in for a medal.”

“Two more... ”

The other skimmer, *Midiya*, attempted the same maneuver, but must have mistimed the drop. The explosion missed. The enemy missile sprinted toward *Cassiel*. Lasers slashed out from the skimmers, but the wildly maneuvering shipkillers avoided their doom with machine speed.

Redwolf entered the holotank’s view, and the lead missile broke apart close to its target’s exhaust plume. Zaxby must have used something

unconventional—the grav-beam, maybe?—because there was no heat flash from a laser strike.

The last missile boosted to sprint mode and detonated behind *Cassiel*, whiting out the display again. Straker found his grip leaving dents in the hard polymer of the rail as he waited, waited...

... and *Cassiel* floated free. Her engine was silent, she was tumbling slowly, and she looked as beaten and battered as any tramp freighter—but she seemed intact.

“Was that a shield I saw on *Cassiel*?” Salishan asked.

Sensors replied, “Yes, ma’am—shield emissions detected. A Langston modular, probably a model 2013, the database says.”

“Miss Jilani’s full of surprises,” Straker said.

“Saved their lives,” Salishan replied. “Helm, coordinate and maneuver for min-time pickup, and then keep us away from the enemy fleet. Comms, pass the word for grabships to bring her in. Damage control and repair to stand by on the flight deck.”

The helmsman, Tomlinson, said, “Ma’am, do we have a destination?”

“I’ll let you know, Tommy.”

The man grinned behind his turned head. If he’d been a dog, his tail would be wagging, Straker thought.

“Sir, what’s our course of action?” Salishan asked.

“How long can we avoid a decisive battle?”

Salishan worked the holotank controls, setting up several projected courses. “Twelve hours at least... maybe twenty to thirty. If they’re persistent and want to fight us, we’re too slow to run forever, even if we had the fuel. In a normal system I’d head for flatspace and jump out, but there is no flatspace here. We either have to fight—and the sim says we’re facing at least five-to-one odds—or run through a wormhole. And we have no idea where any of them go.

Straker chewed his lip, and then pointed at the enemy wormhole. Ships were still emerging from it every minute or two. “Except that one.”

“Since you’re not suicidal, sir... what good does that info do us?”

“I’m not sure yet. All I know is, sometimes the way out is through—and the Predators must know a route out of Hell’s Reach. Our other option is to pick a random wormhole, and I hate going into a situation blind.”

“You know, sir...” Salishan drummed her fingers on the rail. “The butterfly collectors brought us here. Maybe they’ll intervene—defend us.”

“They didn’t intervene just now. It’s only a hunch, but I feel like they’re watching with interest to see what happens. Like naturalists would watch a wolf pack trying to take down a buffalo. We can’t let them figure into our battle calculations. For now, run away and buy us time. Once I talk to Loco and Zaxby, I’ll have a better idea.”

Straker headed for the flight deck. By the time he got there, the big doors were closing and the two grabships set *Cassiel* gently down. Once the sloop was firmly grappled and atmosphere restored, he strode across the deck expecting to meet Loco at the bottom of the ramp.

Instead, he saw a gaggle of Breakers, led by a noncom—a chief, judging by his insignia, though the chevrons on his uniform looked homemade. Field promotion? Name of Sylvester, he remembered from the list of kidnapped Breakers. “Good to see you again, Chief Sylvester. Gentlemen.” Straker shook hands down the line. Big smiles on smudged, weary faces showed their relief. “You’re home again. Get cleaned up, rest, and see Personnel for assignments.”

“Sir, we don’t need rest.” Sylvester said. “Not quite yet.” He gestured at the tail end of the troupe, where six men carried an oblong case.

It took Straker a moment to understand. “Who is it?”

“Lorenzo Alfonsi. Local kid. Just joined up. One of Jilani’s cousins, I hear.”

“Damned shame.”

“We’ll handle it, sir.”

“Let me know the time and place of the service. I’ll be there if I can. Carry on.”

“Aye aye, sir,” Sylvester said, and the men trudged off.

Straker looked up the ramp to see a furred biped watching him, with clear black eyes behind a pointed muzzle and visibly sharp teeth. It had an impressive customized carbine slung, and when it saw Straker return the gaze, it flipped a sharp salute and descended, extending a hand. Another of his kind followed, like a twin.

“Brock, sir, in the service of Captain Jilani. You’ve never seen a Mellivor before, have you?”

Straker returned the salute and shook the sharp-clawed hand, then that of the other. “Nope. Welcome aboard. I’m Straker.”

“My partner Raj and I’ve heard all about you from the Breakers, General. It’s an honor.”

“They might be a little biased, but thanks,” he said glancing at the battered ship. “Thanks for helping get our people home.”

“We did our part.”

Brock stepped aside as Loco leaped off the edge of the ramp to land lightly and bear-hug Straker. They pounded on each other’s back in delight. “God, it’s good to see you, Derek. Have I got some stories for you.”

“Likewise,” Straker said, holding his best friend at arm’s length. “Great to see you in one piece. Is Jilani...”

Loco’s face clouded and he lowered his voice, glancing up the ramp. “She’s all right, more or less, but she’s had a rough time this trip.”

“That dead kid...”

“Part of it. She’s not as tough as she makes out. Leave her alone for a while, okay? She’ll bunk in her own cabin and come down when she’s ready.”

“Sure, Loco.”

“I’ll tell you more later. Oh, and this is Belinda,” Loco said as a short, buxom blonde barely out of her teens bounced cheerfully down the ramp. The rumpled coverall she wore couldn’t hide her evident appeal. Straker could feel it radiating from five meters away, reminding him of a Tachina clone, but without the lascivious hunger.

Belinda smiled and bowed with a double flourish of her hands. “Lovely to meet you, Manager—ah, General sir.”

Straker nodded a slight return bow. “Same here, Belinda.”

Loco said, “Brock, you guys and Belinda stick close to the ship for now. Ask one of the flight deck noncoms for anything you need, and comlink me if you have any problems.”

“Sure, sir.” Brock took Belinda’s arm in a kind but firm grip. He led her back up the ramp into the ship. “Come on, darlin’. Let’s stay out of the officers’ way.”

“I guess we’ll have something else to talk about,” Straker said with raised eyebrows as he watched the two retreat. “And we do need to talk, right now. Elsewhere. We have a whole fleet on our tail and limited time to figure out a course of action.”

As he and Loco strode across the flight deck, Straker said, “Give me a rundown. Condensed version.”

“After we left Utopia, Captain Jilani contacted elements of a crimorg at the Rainbow Contractor market. That’s where we picked up Belinda, the

badgers, and got a line on where the men were sold. It was a rhodium mine in the Mechrono system. We rescued them, killed some spiders, fought off a spider ship—twice—and Jilani got information that our women had been taken to a secret Predator base in Hell's Reach, along with a route to get there. We followed the route, made it through some scrapes, and here we are."

"Just like that."

"You asked for the condensed version. You want the stories, you have to buy the beer."

"Looking forward to it."

When they reached the bridge, Captain Salishan shook Loco's hand and briefed the two men by the holotank. "I put us on a broad evasion course, counter-orbital to the planetary bodies. This'll give us as many options as possible, and eventually we'll come back around to the wormhole leading to the Predator base—just in case you decide that's where we're going." She looked skeptical of this possibility.

"How many enemy ships?"

"Eighty-three so far. More keep coming through, though a few have returned. About half are following us, and they'll eventually catch us. The other half are spreading out and cutting across to intercept us. We're continuously altering our course, which will buy us time, but if they want to, they'll eventually bring us to battle. Unless we escape through a wormhole."

Loco's eyes roamed the holotank. "Have you found a bunch of mobile, self-directed rocks with EM emissions?"

Salishan turned. "Sensors."

The Sensors officer, who like all the bridge crew had been listening closely to their leaders, quickly highlighted an icon, off to the side of the Predator wormhole. "There's a big group of them here, ma'am. Six enemy ships nearby, but not approaching."

"Zoom in," Loco said. The view zoomed in to show the now familiar Lithoids. "These are allies of ours. We established communication with them. They defended us and destroyed eight Predator ships."

"Allies..." Straker mused. "We sure need some here. You said they already fought the Predators?"

"The Lithoids defended us, the Predators attacked them, and they counterattacked. They also lost a... a guy, an individual, as far as we could

tell. But the ones with us then were just kids. These are the grownups,” he said, pointing at the clusters. I have no idea whether they’d be willing to fight alongside us. It’s not their battle.”

“Let’s ask them, shall we?”

Loco searched Straker’s face and lowered his voice. “I know you want to get our women back, especially Carla, but is it fair to ask others to die in our fight?”

“Nothing about war is fair. It’s necessary. We’re not talking about just six Breakers. There must be a whole bunch of captives there—and the Predators are obviously planning to attack other systems, using whatever they’ve got going here at their secret base. This is bigger than us or the Lithoids. This is about opposing evil and saving millions, maybe billions. You said they were grownups. We won’t con them. We’ll tell them the truth and let them decide.”

Loco turned back to the holotank and crossed his arms. “Okay. Doesn’t make me feel good.”

“This is bigger than feeling good.”

“Everything with you always is, Derek.”

Straker suppressed irritation. Loco had obviously been through a lot lately. New worry lines were etched upon his tired face. Something was different about him. Presumably it had to do with Jilani, but now wasn’t the time to hash it out. “Mercy, bring us around to eventually approach the Lithoids. Loco, how do we talk to them?”

“Spacer Richards was doing a good job, using text and a comms terminal.”

Straker nodded. “Comms, page Richards. Tell him to report to the bridge once he’s cleaned up and fed.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Chapter 29

Hell's Reach, SBS *Trollheim*.

Spacer Richards arrived on the bridge of the *Trollheim* in a clean uniform, shoving the last bite of something in his mouth with one hand while clutching a folding terminal with the other. He squeezed between the comms officers and plugged it in, and then turned toward Straker with an open smile. "Ready, sir."

"Give them a short rundown on the Breakers. Who we are, the situation."

Richards typed a few paragraphs. "They understand, sir."

"Can you put that comlink through to audio? Convert my speech directly, and vice versa?"

The comms officer plied his board. "Done, sir. You're on. Remember, the SAI will interpret your meanings using known language constructions, unless you tell it to translate literally."

"Understood. Start the comlink." Straker spoke formally. "This is Derek Straker, commanding the Breakers. To whom have I the honor of speaking?"

The SAI's synthesized spoke. "We are Lithoids. We are Elder Wise, first of our grouping."

"Thank you for helping *Cassiel* and those aboard."

"That was our offspring. They are young and foolish, but we have great affection for them. Please convey our thanks for their return."

"I extend my condolences for the one you lost in battle."

"They were not lost entirely. They were incorporated."

Straker glanced at Richards, who nodded and spoke up. "I think..." he said, "if an individual loses too many parts, they'll incorporate the rest into others, preserving them from complete death."

"Good to hear. Elder Wise, we have a problem. Many innocent people, including some of mine, have been stolen by our enemies, those we call Predators. It's their ships which pursue us now, and wish to kill or capture us. Their groupings have already attacked and killed or stolen many innocent beings. They will attack, kill and capture again. Elder Wise, how do you and your people view the Predator activities?"

“They are reprehensible. However, we are largely immune to predations, and we can defend ourselves. Why should we care what organics do?”

A voice broke in. “Zaxby to Straker. I have a suggestion.”

“Go ahead, since you’re listening anyway...”

“You should be glad I do. I suggest a newly fissioned Roentgen sibling fuse with the Lithoids permanently, in the same way he fused with the vortex. I’ve analyzed the azoic life processes which animate the rocks, and the two species should be uniquely compatible. That will do away with all this lengthy diplomatic jibber-jabber and persuade Elder Wise and his people to be sympathetic.”

“Or not.”

“Or perhaps not. Yet, we are under time pressure. Once we know the Lithoids’ answer, we will be able to decide what to do with far greater clarity.”

Straker paced and considered. “I agree. Elder Wise, we suggest one of our people exchange knowledge and particles directly with you or one of yours. It should not be harmful to you, but if it is, I understand you can isolate and excise one of your parts, one of your rocks, to preserve yourself?”

“Of course. We are composed of hundreds of rocks. Losing one is of little note. We are willing to perform this fusing of which you speak.”

“Zaxby, I presume Roentgen agreed to this?”

“He’s eager to do so. He intends to make a name for himself among his people by spreading his offspring and establishing first contact with new species.”

“God save me from glory-hounds,” Straker muttered.

“I heard that, Derek Straker. Consider: glory is a magnificent motivator. Look what you and I have accomplished in the pursuit of glory.”

“Zaxby, I never wanted glory.”

“Lie to me, but not to yourself, Liberator. Glory is the icing on your cake.”

Straker reminded himself once again not to argue publicly with Zaxby. “Get back here and help Roentgen fission again, ASAP. Then deliver him—one of him—to Elder Wise.”

“On my way. Zaxby out.”

Three hours later, the *Redwolf* departed for the Lithoids. An hour after that, Zaxby reported another Roentgen stepping onto one of the hundreds of rocks composing Elder Wise. No doubt Zaxby and Roentgen had spent the time talking to the Lithoids. Straker hoped the Ruxin hadn't poisoned relations forever with his blather. At least Roentgen was a solid, sensible guy, an excellent ambassador.

"Comlink from Elder Wiser," the comms officer suddenly reported.

Straker stopped his pacing. "Wise-er? Not Wise?"

"That's what he said, sir. I double-checked."

"Take it."

The bridge audio crackled to life. "This is Elder Wiser. After millions of years of life, we have taken a new name. We celebrate."

"We... celebrate along with you, Elder Wiser. I take it the fusing was successful?"

"Our minds reel with the knowledge Roentgen imparted to us. We are a new creature now. We are invigorated with data and emotion! Our people are forever changed! We were Wise before, but are Wiser now."

Was Wiser being witty, or was the wordplay a coincidence? "Glad to hear it. Forgive my bluntness, Elder Wiser, but what about the Predators?"

"We have never been to war before, Liberator Straker. The very concept grieves us. Yet, self-defense is necessary, and evil must be opposed, sometimes with violence. We will help you destroy these Predators and retrieve your stolen persons."

"And free all the innocents." Straker wanted to make sure Wiser understood.

"Of course. Remember, everything Roentgen knew, we know now."

"Knew?"

"Knew, knows, will know. Roentgen are a part of us, and they are no longer an individualized being. Yet they live on with us."

Straker sighed. It was hard to get used to the idea that his friend kept splitting and losing parts of himself—and yet continued, the same as before. Human minds weren't made to easily comprehend the weirdness. "Thank you. We'll do all we can, but your people will do the heavy lifting—the bulk of the fighting, I mean. If you can destroy their ships in space, we'll deal with the ground battle and concentrate on rescuing personnel."

"We understand. Shall we begin?"

"Stand by please, Elder Wiser."

Salishan sidled up beside Straker. "It would really help if our ships could blockade the wormhole before our new allies made a move. Keep the Predators from sending word back."

"Then we could surprise the ones on the other side. Good thinking, Mercy." He examined the holotank, with its complex web of intersecting courses, past and projected. "Can we sneak between them and seize the wormhole?"

"Yes, if we're willing to use a lot of fuel."

"What's a lot?"

"We'll be down to about twenty percent. Then we'll use more in any battle. The more we use, the slower any return trip will be—assuming we don't need to fight."

"If we win, can we refuel?"

"We can get some dirty hydrogen from one of these gas giants and limp home, but we don't have intrinsic refining capability to separate out the deuterium-tritium isotopes that make the best fuel. It won't be pretty."

"Can we salvage fuel and supplies?"

Salishan frowned. "Some. Depends on the state of defeated enemy ships."

"We have to take the chance. We only get one shot at this, and it's now. I'm not leaving our people when we're so close."

"Of course."

"Then go ahead and seize the wormhole."

"Aye aye, sir. Helm, set course for the enemy wormhole, min-time profile, standard acceleration. Sir, you might want to brief our allies."

"Right. Elder Wiser, are you still listening?"

"We listen with great interest. Your voices bring us joy, with Roentgen's knowledge of the speakers enlightening us in ways we never thought possible."

Straker hoped Wiser's evident giddiness wouldn't inhibit the Lithoids' combat power. "Glad you're happy. Please don't make any obvious movements toward the enemy or the wormhole. The element of surprise is critical. Do you understand?"

"We understand," the alien said. "Once you've interdicted the wormhole to eliminate enemy communications through it, we will destroy the Predator ships here in this system. Then, we will regroup and attack those on the

other side, destroying their ships while you organics seize their base and rescue the innocents.”

“Spot on. Maintain this comlink please.”

“Gladly. We await glory.”

“Yes, us too.” Straker’s eyes roved over the holotank as he tried to think of everything.

Be the overall commander, he told himself. Mercy had the ship. The skimmers... they’d turned off their transponders and disappeared from the display, leaving only ghostly guesses as to their positions. *Redwolf* likewise...

He wondered what the Predators thought of *Redwolf*’s activities among the rocks. No enemy ships were nearby, so hopefully they wouldn’t be alarmed. The two major groups were even now turning and burning to try to catch *Trollheim*, but the move between them and toward their wormhole had caught them by surprise. The enemy fleets wouldn’t catch her until at least half an hour after she’d established the blockade.

Trollheim launched a missile spread just before she reached her flip-over point and began decelerating. That way, the shipkillers retained their high velocity as they preceded the big ship. The several Predator ships near the wormhole evaded vigorously, one returning through the gate and the others spreading out and running laterally from the deadly nuclear missiles. Salishan ordered the missiles to decelerate gently and cruise into the area, creating a threat that cleared away all enemies from the vicinity.

Thus, the dreadnought came to relative rest near the wormhole without a battle. Like wolves around a bison, their enemies were biding their time while they maneuvered to arrive together and overwhelm *Trollheim*.

But once the dreadnought was firmly in a position to destroy any ships or drones trying to pass through the wormhole and warn the Predator base, Straker spoke. “Elder Wiser, you may attack now.”

“Gladly. Death or glory!”

The bridge crew gave a ragged cheer as the enormous swarm of rocks accelerated toward the wormhole and the impending battle. It appeared as if the Predators didn’t notice them until it was too late. Minutes before the enemy would have opened massed fire upon *Trollheim*, the Lithoids attacked the enemy ships.

Their crews clearly surprised, those ships had too much momentum to change course—but they tried to turn away, no doubt thinking this was

some bizarre asteroid storm. That was a mistake, as it presented their sterns to the Lithoids. Had the Predators turned directly toward their ambushers and opened fire, they might have made a fight of it.

Instead, they dropped mines and fired missiles, which were easily picked off by the Lithoids. Nuclear detonations screened the Predator ships for a short time, but as soon as those dissipated, the rocks sailed through the radiation—harmless to them—and began tearing the enemy ships apart. They raked the Predators with lightning, and they smashed rocks into their vulnerable sterns.

But the enemy didn't go down easily. They were composed of confident, warlike species, used to attacking and dominating all who opposed them. Each race used its own unique approach to try to resist their doom.

The Arattak suddenly swung around on their gravity tethers, hurling themselves at their enemies—but aiming to pass through the rock swarms, aided by their surprising maneuverability. They fired their many beams, blowing rocks to bits as they ran the gauntlet of Lithoids, and unloaded all their expendable ordnance. Nuclear fire blossomed among the combatants.

At the same time the Korven ships reversed course. They attempted to close with the rocks, no doubt to board them—but even if any were able, there were no controlling creatures to close-assault, no ships to seize. The rocks were simply rocks, animated by energy and intelligence—bizarre azoic machines.

The Crocs turned also, allowing the rocks to come close before charging at them to smash into them. Some detonated their ships in self-destruction, but trading one vessel for one rock was a losing proposition, as each of the many adult Lithoid groups was composed of hundreds of pieces.

The Dusics—centipede-like insectoids, far different from the communal Opters—demonstrated their favorite technology when their ships stretched into segmented shells, revealing high-velocity rail-cannon sheltered between the sections. The flexible ships slithered and rolled, exposing weapons in turn to fire bursts at their enemies.

The Lithoids returned fire with their jagged lightning bolts, matching them burst for burst. The railgun bullets shattered rocks, while the rocks smashed the articulated ships like bugs.

Sinden would have a field day with all this data on how the individual Predator species fight, Straker thought. Hopefully, the Lithoids would also

be learning—and not paying too much for the knowledge. It eased his conscience to know that an individual Lithoid could lose pieces of itself and still live on, rebuild, or if damaged too much, would be incorporated into its fellows.

The Vulps—small, clever foxlike mammalian carnivores—fared the best, for a time. As their allies distracted the Lithoids with their pyrrhic attacks, Vulps spread out and skimmed into underspace, dropping decoys and firing beams from longer range. The SAI and holotank soon showed an absence of enemies, but Straker wasn't at all sure no Vulps had gotten away.

"Sensors, try to track all those Vulps," Salishan barked before Straker could give a similar order. "Underspace detectors on maximum sensitivity. Engineering, put our shields on auto-engage mode, linked with sensors. Comms, cue the skimmers and *Redwolf* on those Vulps. We can't let them hit us—or get through the wormhole."

Straker spoke up. "Elder Wiser? You still there?"

"We are here. Oh, what glorious battle! Tell me there will be more!"

Straker suppressed a twinge of guilt. He'd seen first-time soldiers catch the battle-madness, carried away by the combat high, surviving and winning and charging after a fleeing enemy in an orgasm of slaughter. Yet, he had to use the Lithoids' irrational enthusiasm against the enemy before it burned out.

"There's more glorious battle," he said. "Lots of it. All you can handle, right through this wormhole."

"What life! What death! What songs of glorious destruction we will compose!"

The rocks, the hundreds of groups, turned like a swarm of bees and lined up on the wormhole. Salishan ordered *Trollheim* aside, but there was no need. The Lithoids danced around the ship, flowing past and into the wormhole like a cascade, an avalanche of giant sand particles falling precisely through the chokepoint of a great hourglass. In long seconds, they were through.

Salishan turned to Straker. "Follow them now, or wait?"

"Follow. From Loco's data, the base is at least an hour's fast travel away, so we'll have time to assess the situation and suit up for the ground attack."

"Follow it is. Comms, pass the word to the skimmers and *Redwolf*. Helm, take us through."

As the great ship surged forward, Straker's comlink beeped and he stuck it in his ear. "Straker."

"Mara here. Come to the infirmary."

"Why?" But she'd already clicked off. Straker muttered a curse and shrugged. He'd head down there after a couple of minutes—after seeing the situation on the other side of the wormhole.

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Chapter 30

Straker aboard SBS *Trollheim*. Axis of Predators secret base area.

Trollheim's holotank blanked before it quickly built a picture of nearby space on the other side of the wormhole. Wreckage of at least fifteen enemy ships spun through the void, and the storm of Lithoids spread out from there. Most of them cruised toward the only body of significance in the area, a planetoid—what might be called a small moon if it had a planet to orbit. That body must be the base: it swarmed with ships and small craft, and more were lifting from its surface.

No, Straker saw—not the *only* body of significance. A strange icon pulsed off to the side. The holotank notations showed gravitic readings off the scale. “What’s that?” he asked, pointing.

“Gravity source, sir,” the officer at Sensors reported. “Otherwise, few emissions. I’d guess it’s a black hole.”

“A singularity?”

“Probably, sir, but a natural one. At least, there’s no indication it’s being actively generated or controlled.”

“Get me Zaxby on comlink as soon as he comes through the wormhole. Captain Salishan, move us toward the base and take whatever aggressive action you see fit. I’ll be in the infirmary speaking with Doctor Straker.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

When Straker stepped into the infirmary he nodded to his sister, and then froze stock-still with shock. Lined up against one long wall were two ranks of...

Golems.

They were Straker golems, at least forty of them. Intelligent weapons, like Hok, but a hundred times more deadly.

This must have been what Sinden was going to show him.

Would it have mattered? He wasn’t sure.

The golems turned their knowing, intelligent gazes at him, and it was as if he looked into multiple mirrors, each with his distorted face.

“Before you say anything, Derek, listen,” Mara said, stepping in front of him. “I’ve been making these guys and keeping them in stasis ever since the first one was so successful. Each of them is a battle-optimized copy of you—except they’ll only last a few days at most, until they fall apart.”

“Fall apart why?”

“Their structure is utterly unnatural—duralloy exoskeleton and bones, super-strong polymeric musculature, supercharged metabolism. Each one is a living battlesuit, times ten. But to make them super-troopers, they can’t last long. Not with my current level of subquantum tech knowledge. Yet each has *your* mind and *your* sense of duty. I’ve briefed them on the stakes, and they’re all in agreement. Just like you, they’d all gladly fight and die for Carla, and for the Breakers.”

Straker ran his eyes over the ranks. “Mara, this is... wrong! This is monstrous!”

“No, Derek. It’s necessary. Did you see the size of that base? They must have thousands, tens of thousands of defenders. We have five mechsuits and ninety-five marines. We need every edge. Every golem that dies is a real person who won’t. I wish I could build a thousand of them.” She touched his arm. “Anything that saves your life. Your real life.”

Straker felt sick to his stomach. “You’ve gone too far this time. You and Zaxby, right? I knew *he* was amoral, but *you*...”

Mara turned to the golems. “Prime, come here, please.”

The first golem in line walked up to Straker and held out a hand covered with articulated plates of duralloy—its skin. With a wink and a smile he spoke. His voice wasn’t quite right... it was like Straker’s voice after gargling some gravel. “Hello, Derek. I’m Derek. Nice to meet you.”

A large, blocky number “1” was tattooed on his forehead. Straker noticed the others had numbers on theirs as well.

He took the thing’s—the man’s—hand automatically and felt the effortless strength there. He himself was engineered, and he knew the pain of realizing he was a made thing, created as part of a weapons-system: the mechsuit.

How much more must this golem feel that pain?

“Likewise,” Straker said after a moment. “Listen—”

“Please, shut the hell up, will you?” the Prime golem said. “Imagine if you woke up here, like this. What would you do? Don’t answer right away. Think, Derek. Think.”

Straker thought, forcing himself to be plain and honest. “I’d do what needed to be done, with no regrets. It is what it is.”

“Right. And I’m you.” Prime gestured at the others. “So now you know what I’m thinking. We’re all *you*, Straker. Most of us will probably die in

the fight. The rest will fall apart, break down biologically. Too bad. It is what it is... We'll do it for Carla, for you—and for the Breakers. For the people we're saving from these Predators, and for all the people you'll save from Steel and his regime once you return to human space and overthrow him."

"I'm not planning to—"

"Sure you are!" the golem laughed. "You know, deep down, that you'll eventually go back and set things right. But you won't do it without Carla by your side, and your Breakers have to know you'll move heaven and hell to get her back—and any other Breaker. This is fate-of-the-galaxy stuff, Derek. I know how I'd feel in your place. Think of how you'd feel in mine." The golem never let go of Straker's hand, and it was as if his strength and his certainty flowed from the creature into him, his resolve hardening like the armored battle-shell built into its body.

It is what it is, he thought. Accept it.

Straker took a deep breath, let it out, and extricated his hand from the golem's grip. He turned to Mara. "As for you, little sister, we're going to have a serious conversation about this on the way home."

"No problem," she said. Her expression was flat. "Now get into the rejuvenation tank."

"Why?"

"I'm going to juice up your Breaker Bug. It's not recommended for long-term use, but for a day or two you'll be damn-near unkillable. The other mechsuiters and battlesuiters already got it."

Straker searched her eyes, seeing the concern and determination there. "Okay. How long will it take?"

"Five minutes." She patted the canopy of the coffin-like tube. "Here you go."

Straker checked his chrono, and then hopped in. The canopy closed. Through the crystal he could see the golems watching. They all nodded at him in unison. He felt the sting of injections, and his consciousness faded for a moment.

When he came to and the canopy opened, he checked his chrono. Five and a half minutes. Close enough.

"How do you feel?" Mara asked.

Straker sat up and flexed his hands. "Energized... Powerful."

“Good. You’ll take a lot of punishment, and you’ve got five times your normal strength—which is already five times a normal man. Your bones are toughening up even as we speak, otherwise you might break them trying something impossible. You’ll even be able to survive unharmed in vacuum for several minutes if you need to. Remember to recalibrate your mechsuit.”

“I will. Thanks, sis.”

“You’re welcome.”

He turned to leave. “Golems, follow me to the armory.”

Mara spoke up. “Derek?”

“What, Mara?”

“This fight will be ugly. Don’t be human today. Be what you were made to be.”

Straker lifted his head and stared at the blinking EXIT sign above the door. “A killing machine.”

“Death on two legs.”

He snorted derisively. “Like a golem?”

“Like an avenging angel. And Derek?”

“What, Mara?”

She hugged him from behind, briefly. “Bring her back.”

“Count on it.”

He stalked out. Her touch and her words lingered like ghosts.

The golems filed down the passageways behind him. Crew braced the wall or slipped into side corridors as the line of bizarre humanoids tramped in unison toward the armory, where they quickly equipped themselves with comlinks, weapons, gear and ammo. Of course, Straker didn’t need to say a word or give a command. Each golem had his mind, his memories, his expertise and decisiveness. Elite soldiers, elite leaders, elite followers, elite operators.

What he couldn’t do with an army of *these*. He recalled his idea about special operations teams.

No!

That was a temptation of Biblical proportions. He couldn’t give in. Golems were little better than Hok, morally speaking. Perfect battle-drones, even if, once created, they *chose* to live and die for the Breakers. Their one saving grace was they didn’t destroy a real human in the making. Yet, creating sentient beings doomed to disintegrate and die within days was nearly as evil. He told himself he’d never do it again.

He wondered whether he was lying.

Once equipped, the golems marched to the flight deck. There, they loaded into landers. Straker could see the battlesuiters watch curiously, also loading. What could he say to them? Better not to go into detail, but they would need some explanation.

“Straker to Bronke.”

The battlesuit company commander responded immediately. “Bronke here.”

“You heard about the golems, I’m sure. The ones that took down several enemy ships at Humbar?”

“I heard through the grapevine, sir. I have to say, that’s creepy.”

“Believe me, I know. They were made of me. So are these forty you see here. We’d never do this if the situation weren’t so desperate. The brainiacs made them and we have to use them—but they’re not me, not General Derek Straker. You don’t take their orders. Even so... listen if one tells you something. Coordinate with them. Use your best judgment.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Straker out.”

Along one wall five mechsuits stood—Hetson’s squad, already buttoned up, plus Straker’s own suit, standing open. He wished Loco’s suit were here. Loco could switch out with another pilot, but that would be horribly unjust. Besides, suits were individualized. It would take hours in diagnostic mode to fully adapt one to a new pilot.

And they didn’t have hours.

That reminded him to climb in gingerly and recalibrate his cockpit for his new level of strength. The wraparound body sensors were backups and augmentations to the brainlink inputs, everything working in unison, a system of systems that needed to harmonize: mind, body, machine.

A killing machine, he’d told Mara honestly.

He looked forward to the killing, ached for it, as a man thirsted for water in the desert or lusted for a lover.

First things first. He opened the ship’s view in his brainlinked VR HUD, absorbing that familiar feeling of flying through space, the ship’s sensors becoming his own senses.

Trollheim was on course for the enemy base and accelerating. The three skimmers followed immediately behind the dreadnought—covering her

against the sneaky Vulps, no doubt. Ahead, the Lithoids readied themselves for battle with the Predator space forces.

Straker tried to do a force comparison, rocks versus enemies, but the Lithoids were so unconventional and the data so thin that the SAI couldn't provide an answer. The Lithoids were terrifyingly powerful, but they were far from indestructible... and he had no idea what awaited them at the base. Was it a fortress, or a logistical center? What was it doing out here in Hell's Reach? What was the Axis of Predators planning?

A window opened in his HUD—Zaxby on vidlink.

"Straker here."

"Greetings, General Straker. You wished to consult with me?"

"Anything more about the wormhole engineers? The butterfly collectors?"

"Nothing specific. We need more time to attempt to communicate with them."

"Do that later. What do you think about this setup?"

"The enemy base?"

"Yes. Why is it here? Why is it orbiting a black hole? What are they up to?"

"I should think it was obvious."

"Not to me—obviously. Quit your mind games and explain."

"You're no fun."

Straker held his temper. "Nope. Now do what you do best and talk."

"What I do best is *think*—but I digress. To review: we've discovered stable wormholes here, as portals. They are generated by singularities—black holes, that is."

"Got it."

"And surprisingly, these portals grant FTL transit, via some unknown technology or technique. In common parlance, they are stargates. Portals. This is key."

"Because if you could open a portal wherever you wanted, you could arrive instantaneously, anywhere, even inside curved space. It would revolutionize warfare."

"I see you're not a complete dolt. Yes, warfare is the obvious operational application of this technology. It's not surprising you saw that first. Of course, what can be discovered and invented will also be countered—but not immediately. Whomever operationalizes this technology first will

have a window of opportunity to strike directly at planets, without warning, bypassing most defenses.”

“And that window could topple empires. Even Crossroads could be taken.”

“Yes.”

“Or Atlantis and the Republic.”

“Yes.”

“And the Predators are here. Building a base right next to a black hole.”

Zaxby’s voice gained amusement. “Yes. Go on, you’re on the right track.”

“And there’s no sidespace limit on wormhole portals. Ships could be built as big as you wanted. Or... you could mount weaponry on asteroids... or planetoids. Planets!”

“Precisely, though my calculations say that a planet-sized portal would need a large black hole indeed. Still—”

“—this one here could generate a wormhole big enough to transit the base in front of us directly to Crossroads, or any other target. Hell, this could be a planet-killer too. Send a planetoid through and simply let it crash into a living world. It could wipe out all life.”

“Or, if used positively, this technology could usher in an age of easy, cheap trade and tremendous prosperity.”

“People always weaponize new technology if they can, because weapons are naked power. Look at the invention of aircraft, or atomics, or spaceships.” Straker frowned. “The Predators are here because the tech is here. They obviously haven’t operationalized it yet, thank the Cosmos. We have to acquire it—or destroy it.”

“Once a thing is known to be possible, it cannot be destroyed, Derek Straker, only delayed.”

“I know. Five-meter targets, Zaxby. Deal with what’s in front of us first. Kill these bastards, get our people back, and salvage what tech we can. The exploitation afterward will be your job—you and your science team.”

“It will be my pleasure. Zaxby out.”

Straker tried to find *Redwolf*, but it looked like Zaxby was still in stealth mode. No doubt he’d show up at some critical moment to play the hero—which was fine. The rubbery bastard had a knack for saving the day, and if he could do it one more time, more power to him.

And Roentgen was aboard, Straker remembered. He hoped Zaxby wouldn't get the Thorian killed. Then he remembered that at least one descendant had returned to the Thorian ship just after fusing, so his friend lived on no matter what, in a way.

After checking in with his ground forces, Straker studied the briefing packages the ever-efficient Sinden uploaded to the network. Notes on tactics and enemy capabilities predominated. Real intelligence on the base was extremely sparse. Long-range imagery and sensor readings showed extensive surface facilities beneath a thin atmosphere, and indications of shallow subsurface tunneling and caverns too.

Fortunately, there was little defensive weaponry. The Axis clearly never expected to be found out and attacked here, and even if they were, with so many ships, they thought they were well defended.

They hadn't reckoned with the Lithoids—or the Breakers.

Even so, the extent of the facilities indicated there would be plenty of ground resistance. They knew the Breakers were coming.

And somewhere on that sprawling base—if she wasn't on a ship, or somewhere else—was Carla. He had to believe she was there, still alive, still sane.

He'd fight his way through hell to get her.

Had already done so.

Straker kept half an eye on the wider situation, noting when the skimmers and two Vulp ships skirmished with each other in *Trollheim's* wake. The Vulps weren't willing to commit to battle, merely harassing the Breakers, until one of them abruptly exploded. Straker couldn't tell exactly what happened, as with their transponders turned off, *Trollheim's* sensors could only track the skimmers—and *Redwolf*—intermittently and approximately. After that kill, though, it appeared the remaining Vulp ship withdrew, lurking.

When the Lithoids approached the combined Predator fleet, Straker watched with helpless interest. Over four hundred enemy vessels, ranging from corvettes barely termed ships up to heavy cruisers, formed into squadrons along species lines. Only the Arattak and Korven showed some coordination between species; the other three major races fought separately, but the five clearly had no admiral, no controlling commander.

The Lithoids had inferior numbers, inferior combat power, as far as the SAI could determine—counting each Lithoid group-person as a ship—but

they attacked with greater intensity and coordination.

First, they fought their way through a screen of missiles and decoys, which were backed up by attack ships and long-range fire. The conventional missiles did little damage to the rocks, but some nukes got through, blowing individual rocks to gravel or melting them to slag. The Lithoids seemed hardly to notice, absorbing their casualties and using their lightnings to zap many of the warheads before they could detonate.

When the orgy of explosions dissipated, the rocks steamrolled the attack ships and small craft. Those tried to flee back to their lines, and some made it.

Behind them came the implacable Lithoid swarm, now reduced by a few percent, still awesome and terrible in its intensity. Straker wondered if the Predators felt fear.

In their place, he'd be afraid.

The battle was taking place within *Trollheim's* primary weapons range, but unfortunately the rocks were between the dreadnought and any targets. Straker had no doubt Salishan was poised to fire as soon as she could.

In fact, the big ship was launching a missile spread now. Wave after wave of shipkillers ejected themselves from tubes and lined up under positive control, cruising ahead, aiming for the battle. Straker was no space tactician, but it was clear what his flag captain was doing: as soon as there were targets—or if the Lithoids were defeated or repulsed—every missile in *Trollheim's* magazines would try to finish off the rest. It was an all-or-nothing gamble with the expendable ordnance, but a good one.

After that, there would be *Trollheim* herself.

And the ground assault forces.

The Lithoids met the main enemy fleet with a titanic crash, the stupendous energies involved overwhelming the sensors and HUD system with inputs. For long minutes Straker could see nothing but furious destruction. Pieces of rocks and wreckage shot out of the furball. Lightnings flashed. Ships exploded.

One unlucky Dusic frigate exited the battle—to one side, from the approaching *Trollheim's* viewpoint—providing a clear shot. Immediately, the dreadnought swung her nose, lined up, and fired her massive spinal particle cannon. The bolt ripped the centipede ship to shreds. Unfortunately, that was the only opportunity *Trollheim* had to support the Lithoids before the end.

That end came when suddenly, a remnant of rocks—a group of fewer than four hundred chunks out of the tens of thousands of individual pieces that had entered battle—raced away, curving off to escape. Straker wondered if they'd broken, routed, or had decided to preserve themselves. Perhaps whatever piece of them was Roentgen had brought them to their senses.

Or maybe he'd driven them to battle-madness.

If they survived, Straker would ask—and thank—what remained of Elder Wiser and Roentgen.

But the Lithoids' efforts and sacrifices had wrecked the enemy. Out of four hundred or more ships, perhaps forty remained—the strongest or luckiest ships, and all battered. With the field now clear of allies, *Trollheim's* missile strike accelerated at maximum, spreading out and launching decoys. At the same time, the dreadnought herself fired, spearing their largest ship, a Croc battlecruiser. That one resisted the first shot with its shields, but a second particle beam bolt reduced it to slag.

Yet forty ships could still put up a strong point-defense. The missile wave only destroyed or neutralized about twenty of them by the time *Trollheim* faced the remaining twenty. Normally, twenty to one would be a hopeless fight, even given that a dreadnought was worth at least five heavy cruisers.

Fortunately, the enemy was battered and hurt. *Trollheim* was in good shape, and crewed by elite spacers, veterans who'd been through battle after battle over the last ten years—against fellow humans, against Opters, and against the fearsome Crystals. They knew how to get the most out of their systems, knew where to hit an enemy ship to do the most damage—and knew they had a fighting captain. Her given name might be Mercedes—meaning “mercy” in one of Old Earth's languages, Straker knew—but behind her back they called her “No Mercy” Salishan.

She showed no mercy now.

Straker allowed himself to vicariously revel in her ruthlessness as she dismantled ship after ship with deadly efficiency. As *Trollheim* closed to short range, her primary weaponry bolts—one every ninety seconds or so—became unstoppable. They blew through shields and hammered the ships they struck. Even if the targets were not destroyed, they were taken out of the fight. That was the true value of size, of a big ship. The big gun.

It soon became clear there was only one thing for the enemy to do.

Move in for an-out attack.

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Chapter 31

Hell's Reach, SBS *Trollheim*.

In Straker's HUD view the last fifteen enemy ships and gaggle of remaining small craft accelerated toward *Trollheim*. The dreadnought's shields at her prow flared with repeated strikes from beams, railguns and a couple of shipkillers the Predators had kept in reserve. Her heaviest armor and reinforcement were there, on her nose: her narrowest, thickest part. As intended, the defenses resisted and absorbed all that damage, preserving the ship through the storm—but only barely.

Straker could see the damage control board blossom with yellows and reds.

As the ship's bow defenses began to fail, she fired one last spinal shot and spun laterally. The particle beam took out the enemy's biggest remaining ship, an Arattak cruiser, and then *Trollheim* flew sideways through space, presenting her undamaged broadsides. Impellers spun the ship like an immense rifle bullet—making it difficult for any enemy to line up on any one part and punch through.

This technique also allowed the ship's many secondary beams and short-range railgun turrets to roll into forward arc, fire, and then roll out, recharging before they came around again. Straker was reminded of old sailing warships that—if they had a large enough crew—would yaw to port and starboard, bringing alternate broadsides into play.

The multiple secondary weapons slashed at the enemy even as they fired back. Arattak aimed their top-shaped ships and fired all their beams together in a web of laser light. Korven tried to grapple onto the dreadnought's hull, a few making it down to stick like lampreys. In the absence of battlesuited marines, the crew and the automated defenses would have to handle any boarders that cut their way in.

That reminded him... "Straker to Loco."

"Loco here."

"Where are you?"

"In the armory, climbing into a spare battlesuit and getting ready to ask you where you want me."

"There are a few Korven grappled to the hull. Take charge of repelling boarders. Once the ship is secure, join the assault or do whatever you think

will help.”

“Got it. Good hunting.”

“You too. Straker out.”

Outside, *Trollheim* was fighting the remaining twelve or so battered enemies to a standstill. She blasted and chopped at the enemy, doing damage, but was losing turrets and weaponry in equal measure. It became a race to see who ran out of guts first, like two fighters in a ring, barely able to stand.

Suddenly, two Arattak cruisers disappeared in blossoms of nuclear fire. Straker saw no missiles, and the dreadnought’s magazines were empty, so what—

Beyond the dwindling enemy fleet, two skimmer icons flashed briefly as they dipped in and out of underspace. Straker cheered, whooping behind his faceplate until he remembered nobody could hear him unless he opened a channel. The skimmers had quite properly waited for the right opportunity—ships with shields down, exposing them to float mines, their crews no doubt distracted by the intense battle in front of them.

Two more ships exploded, then another.

With the sudden loss of a third of their number, the seven remaining ships ran, blasting laterally to escape along the axis of *Trollheim*’s stern, where most of her weaponry couldn’t reach. The dreadnought couldn’t turn easily due to gyroscopic precession—the resistance a spinning object had to changing its axis—so they got away. The two skimmers—the third one must be still guarding against the lurking Vulps—harassed the fleeing enemy. Straker was no expert, but he thought he could call the space battle a hard-fought victory.

“Salishan to Straker.”

“Straker here.”

“We’ve got a temporary stalemate, sir. Best I can do. I’m slowing for drop, but I can’t afford to take up orbit—we’d be a sitting duck for enemy reattack. You get one pass, and we’ll have to come back for you. Any further instructions?”

“No, Mercy. Tell the crew for me that they’ve done a heroic job. Now it’s our turn.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“See you on the other side. Straker out.”

The flight deck controller beeped into the channel and droned, “All assault forces, prepare for launch. Launch in order on the green. I say again, launch in order on the green. Mechsuits, you’ll be last. Hold for drop signal.”

Blocky landers powered up, their running lights activating briefly before turning off again. Straker could see the pilots behind the slabs of transparent duralloy framing their cockpits. He switched to the mechsuit channel. “Straker to Hetson.”

“Hetson here.”

“You ready, killer?”

“Born ready, sir. Who wants to live forever?”

Straker thought about the golems, and the rejuvenation tank, and living forever. “Time to kick some ass. We drop straight out the doors. Stay together and cue off me. We’re the heaviest hitters, the punch, the fire brigade. We’re here to kill every Predator we see. No quarter, no surrenders, no prisoners, no regrets. Anybody got a problem with that?”

The responses came as one. “No, sir!”

“Do your best to avoid harming any captives we find. Six Breakers were taken here. We’re going to bring them home.”

“Roger that, sir.”

Alive—or dead, they understood his unspoken subtext.

Straker’s HUD feed showed the planetoid looming as the dreadnought slowed and slowed further, matching rotation. Secondaries stabbed downward, blasting the few fixed defense turrets and missile launchers they identified, clearing the way for the vulnerable landers.

When the flight doors opened and the drop lights turned green, those landers shot out into space. As the last of them cleared the opening, Straker unclamped and walked carefully across the deck. The plates there weren’t designed for the pressure of a mechsuit stride. When he reached the opening, the drop lights turned red again.

“Mechsuits hold fast,” the controller said.

Straker waited for the signal.

Long seconds passed. The controller was giving the mechsuits the best profile possible, dropping them when *Trollheim* was lowest and slowest.

“Ten seconds. Nine. Eight... ”

When the ten seconds had passed and the green light blazed brightly, Straker stepped out into space. The other mechsuits followed. “Drop forces

clear,” he reported.

“Drop forces clear aye. Good hunting, sir.”

“Death from above. Straker out.”

He shifted his attention to the mechanics of the drop, always a tricky operation for a mechsuit. Below him, the enemy complex was spread out over tens of kilometers, and it was clear from the scale of excavations that the place was intended to grow much larger. A quick calculation showed him the population was potentially unlimited. They could deploy millions, maybe billions of troops on a planetoid like this, larger than any fortress. If suitably armed and supplied, and if it could be sent via wormhole gate, it would become an assault platform of unrivaled size. Thousands of ships could ride along, and millions of landers could make a short trip from the surface to a target world. The ancient, horrifying dream of true alien invasion, where whole planets were subjugated and enslaved by massive, irresistible occupation forces rather than by orbital bombardment, could become a reality.

The falling mechsuits quickly struck the thin atmosphere, and Straker popped his canards to control his fall. They gave the illusion of flight. In reality, the angle of dive was so steep that without bleeding off velocity, the five mechsuits would end up as permanent parts of the landscape.

Straker’s comlink clicked and he heard a faint singing under someone’s breath. *“If I die in a combat zone, box me up and ship me home...”* One of the mechsuiters’ microphones must have been on voice-activation: Lieutenant Flint, his HUD told him.

“Who’s got that beautiful voice?” Straker asked, laughing.

“Oh... sorry, sir.”

“No worries, Flint. Men have been singing battle songs since the ancient Egyptians—probably before. Watch your glide slopes.”

Following his own orders, Straker began his landing sequence, turning his fall into brief flight, and then his flight into a stall. The atmosphere was so thin, he had to use a lot of jet power—meaning fuel. In fact, it was half-gone by the time his feet touched the ground.

“Watch your fuel states. There’s no resupply,” he said, and then took off at a ground-eating lope toward the nearest building.

Infantry-class weaponry—semi-portable crew-served lasers and railguns, or antitank missiles—met his advance, and he turned to run laterally, slipping his Jackhammer aside, rolling into a somersault to throw

them off before springing to his feet again. The best defense was not getting hit, he reminded himself, and put a force-cannon bolt into the source of the heaviest fire. He used the twisted wreckage of a laser turret as cover and reversed himself, popping out to take another shot where they least expected him. Soon, the old battlefield rhythm of move and shoot, shoot and move, reasserted itself. He was come home again, here on this scarred and desolate planetoid, once more doing a deadly dance with his enemies, a place he'd occupied from his earliest memories as a kid playing mechsuit vidgames.

Platoons of fearless Korven infantry defended every strongpoint as he worked the edges, stripping away the resistance to open holes into the facilities for the battlesuiters and golems. The golems divided themselves into four-man squads, using cover and concealment among the rocks and vegetation—clumps of colorful giant fungus, the only thing that seemed to be able to grow in the harsh environment. They slipped in close, infiltrating until they could suddenly, savagely spring upon their enemies and rend them from close range. They made the deadly Korven look like clumsy children, spinning among them with seeming impunity as they dodged and killed.

The battlesuiters used more conventional tactics. As soon as a mechsuit disrupted a Korven unit with force-cannon bolts and gatlings, battlesuiters assaulted with exaggerated speed in their powered armor. They led with salvos of bunker-busting mini-missiles and followed up with storms of blaster and pulse-gun fire as they advanced. Plasma grenades cleared foxholes or bunkers by flash-frying Korven with sun-hot gases, and then the Breakers breached the vast complexes.

But for the mechsuiters, the problem was simply one of numbers. The Korven infantry seemed endless. Straker's HUD estimates of the opposition rose into the hundreds of thousands as more and more units converged to counterattack. He got some relief when *Trollheim* was able to circle around for a second firing run, but Salishan reported that the remaining enemy ships were still stalking the battered dreadnought, and they had enough force to destroy her if she turned to slug it out. She did deploy all her remaining armed small craft—shuttles and pinnaces—to provide close ground support.

Unfortunately, each boat was met with storms of fire from the ground, and Straker ordered them to keep back, preserve themselves, and snipe from

above at long range. He wished they had a supply of cheap dumb gravity bombs, but those went out of style with aerospace carriers. He made a note to himself that, with the potential increase in smaller actions, the Breaker ships could use refitting for flexibility, even if it cost them some raw firepower.

The three skimmers also strafed the enemy for a short time, but were called away to help *Trollheim* deal with the remaining enemy squadron stalking her.

In short, the elite Breaker forces were being ground down, swamped in a sea of enemies, dying the death of a thousand cuts—or a million pinpricks. Thousands of shots slowly wore away Straker's superb armor, and his fuel state dropped lower and lower as he faced not companies, not battalions, but whole brigades of Korven infantry. They'd been in some form of hibernation, it appeared, waiting for the planned assault. Battlesuiters reported seeing empty warehouses full of recently vacated stasis tubes used to store sleeping soldiers, alongside bare weaponry racks.

Unfortunately, these barracks were intermixed among compounds of captives, or he'd have used low-yield nukes on them.

The compounds of captives were horror shows. Straker could hardly spare a moment to absorb the reports, but they told of endless rows of millions of creatures of many species, all immobilized and hooked to semi-organic machines. He ordered his battlesuiters and golems not to try to help them for now. They were alive, even if in some ghastly state of thrall.

Instead, he concentrated on killing, endless killing.

At first, the slaughter slaked his thirst, but now it became drudgery, necessary but joyless... and according to his suit's calculations, it was a losing battle.

Yet there had to be a way. He needed some new element, some trick of tactics. And that meant...

"Straker to Zaxby," he comlinked on the fleet channel.

"Zaxby here."

"We're being ground down. The mechsuits are running out of fuel and ammo. We've lost twenty battlesuiters and a couple of golems, and there seem to be more Korven all the time. If we don't do something, we'll be swamped. I need a magic trick from you."

"I can provide it, but you won't like it."

"Meaning?"

“Do you want to win and rescue our people, or debate morality? It’s better that you leave the details to me.”

Straker thought about the golems, and the compromises he’d already made. He imagined Zaxby’s action would cause excessive collateral damage—possibly casualties among the innocent captives. Did he even want to know the specifics?

He recalled Carla’s face, and his responsibilities. What had Loco said? If he wasn’t willing to make the hard choices, he should never have committed the Breakers to battle.

“Okay. Do it, whatever it is. I can hate myself for it later.”

“Or you could choose not to... but you are who you are, Derek Straker. As am I. So, one magic trick, coming up in two minutes.”

Two minutes later Straker’s HUD showed *Redwolf* appear from underspace, directly above the largest concentration of Korven troops, and then it disappeared again. A moment later, a massive explosion blossomed at ground level. At least a hundred thousand enemies were vaporized in one heartbeat—along with untold numbers of captives.

Probably, millions had just died.

Yet there were millions more captives—tens of millions, perhaps—spread out over dozens of square kilometers of basements. The fact that the captives were underground while the storehouses and infantry barracks were on the surface no doubt saved some—but the toll was unimaginable.

Straker simply chose not to imagine it. He couldn’t afford to let himself care at this point. Zaxby clearly didn’t care. Straker had to trust that the lunatic hadn’t killed Carla.

What Zaxby had done for certain was remove perhaps a third of the enemy forces in one stroke.

Just as Straker ordered his men to advance into the swirling dust and flame, another, even larger explosion lit up the west side. More enemies were vaporized.

His HUD told him that this strike, unlike the first, was accompanied by a lot of radiation and fallout. He realized the first must have been *Redwolf*’s lone antimatter float mine, and this one, the final blow delivered by the ship’s single available nuclear weapon.

Straker’s HUD also told him Zaxby had dropped these weapons on areas free of Breakers. The battle now looked much more even.

“Zaxby to Straker. Along with sheer numbers killed, I destroyed their primary and backup command centers. You should find the going much easier now. You’re welcome—Zaxby out.”

“Thanks,” Straker said into a dead comlink. He opened the general ground forces channel. “All right, Breakers. The enemy must be shaken and shocked. Time to push. Let’s finish off these bastards.”

He switched to the fleet channel. “Small craft, skimmers, I need you *now* to support our attack. We’re going to wipe out the enemy and rescue our people.”

Redwolf joined the support, strafing and blasting. Straker gathered his mechsuits into a single unit and advanced on the largest remaining concentration of enemies, perhaps a hundred thousand of them. The Korven fought viciously, but without coordination. Zaxby had been right—again.

He’d done what was necessary—what Straker should have done from the start: killed millions to save tens of millions... in the long run, it could be billions.

Maybe Zaxby should be in charge, Straker thought. But no, the Ruxin had no moral compass, and this situation was an extreme exception. The exception may test the rule, but the rule was still necessary, or all of life devolved into cold expediency. Into mindless, vicious, inhuman warring for dominance.

That way lay madness.

More madness, anyway. There was plenty of madness to be had here.

Even with his new advantages, Straker realized he was still running out of fuel—and time.

“Straker to Hetson.”

“Hetson.”

“I’m on fumes, and I’m out of gatling ammo. I’m going to dismount, turn my suit over to your remote control, and go underground. I’ll try to link up with our battlesuiters or golems. You do the same when the time comes. Fight in the suits as long as you can, then dismount. Press them now. My SAI thinks we’ve nearly broken them.”

“Roger wilco, sir. I’ve got your datalink. Good luck.”

“I’ll be on comlink, but with no HUD, I’ll have to rely on verbals. Straker out.”

He searched for and found a hole in the floor of a collapsed building. Below, he could see rows of captives. With a sigh, he gave the final

commands for his suit to unlink, link itself to Hetson's and to let him dismount.

To unlink was to diminish. Suddenly, instead of a metal god striding the battlefield, he was just a tiny man standing among the wreckage, watching his war machine depart with deliberate, fuel-conserving steps. Worse, he found he couldn't breathe. The thin atmosphere couldn't sustain human life.

But then, he didn't need to breathe—for a short time. A couple of minutes, according to Mara's words. Squatting, he dropped down the hole into the underground.

And found himself in Hell.

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Chapter 32

Straker, Axis of Predators base, underground.

The captive creatures Straker saw here in the vast underground warehouse were Humbar, or very like them. They were bovine, all females, many with swollen udders. All were dead or dying from the lack of atmosphere brought on by breaching their subterranean storehouse. The machines to which they were attached—which had organic components in a bizarre hybrid of mechanics, electronics and rubbery resinous tentacles—showed lights and readouts, but they couldn't keep their victims alive without pressurization and oxygen.

Some of the females were visibly pregnant. Straker saw one which had given sudden and sickening stillbirth, a miscarriage brought on by the trauma of atmosphere loss. The bovine calf lay where it had gasped out its dying breaths, still attached by its umbilical cord.

That it was not human gave Straker enough emotional distance to carry on. He couldn't afford to care right now. Rather, he channeled his disgust into anger, feeding a surge of rage. He raced down the rows of dead things toward a hatch with a standard dogging wheel. It had shut when the atmosphere pressure dropped, but it was easy enough to unlock.

What was hard was opening the door against the pressure on the other side. Without Mara's Breaker Bug boosting, he'd never have done it. Atmosphere rushed out as he braced himself and pushed until he could squeeze through.

The hatch slammed itself shut behind him.

He found himself in another warehouse of people. This time the Humbar were all males, and were alive—more or less. Before he could notice anything else, something leaped at him from between the rows.

He caught the animal in midair. No, it wasn't an animal. It was an immature Korven, all teeth and claws and hunger.

He ripped it apart with his hands and dropped its remains on the ground.

Down the rows he stalked, destroying several more of the spawn, which attacked him on sight. For some reason they didn't attack or try to eat the helpless bovine males.

As he jogged toward the far end of the warehouse looking for the next door, one captive's attendant machinery came suddenly to life. A laser on a

mechanical tentacle sliced open its belly and a Korven offspring the size of a twenty-kilo dog fell out onto a tray. The tray contained a separate chunk of warm, bloody meat, which the creature quickly set about devouring. As it ate, the tray lowered itself to the floor. As soon as the obscene thing was birthed, two organic tentacles pulled the bovine host's sliced skin together, sealing up the caesarian birth with resinous goo.

Straker stomped the Korven hatchling before it had a chance to finish its meal.

More Korven spawn skittered around the nauseating nursery. Some had been decanted; some had ripped their way out of their hosts on their own.

He killed them when he could.

The process became clear in Straker's mind. Use females to breed more hosts. Use implanted males to breed more Korven. Unlike in the wilds of nature, with these machines the implanted creatures could be re-used many times, re-implanted, living out their hellish days hosting parasites which became soldiers—soldiers that would be used to destroy their own progenitor's homeworlds.

That explained why the Korven spawn hadn't eaten the bovine hosts. They must have some biological inhibition, to keep them from destroying valuable incubators.

Living, sentient incubators.

Straker looked for one bull with scars older than the one who'd just birthed his parasite, but who was not showing the bulge of a new parasite—one best able to survive being unhooked, he judged. He stepped forward to smash the machine holding the bull and stripped away the tentacles and wires and tubes attached to every significant part, leaving the victim lying on the floor. The creature soon woke, but dully, his eyes glazed and uncomprehending, and then fell unconscious once more.

Straker left him there. The bull would either live or die. If he lived, maybe he could free more of his people. Right now, Straker had more pressing matters.

He tried his comlink. "Straker to Prime."

There was no answer. Probably the underground walls and machinery were interfering with the signal.

"Straker to any Breaker." He rotated channels. "Straker to anyone."

"Golem 37 here, Derek."

Straker snorted at the irony. “Yes... Derek. I need weapons. Can you spare a golem or battlesuiter to find me?”

“I have your signal. One of us will be there soon. 37 out.”

Within minutes a golem opened a hatch and jogged up to him, a satchel formed out of a tarp over his shoulder. “Golem 23 reports as ordered.” The thing’s—the man’s—wry smile showed he fully understood the strangeness of the situation. “Here’s your gear.”

The golem set down the tarp and unfolded it. Inside was a stained battle harness, still with most of the usual equipment in attached pouches. “This was 19’s. He took an unlucky head shot, so it’s still in good shape. And his two blasters, with spare ammo and power packs. Sorry, no body armor.” The golem thumped his chest, his natural breastplate of duralloy. “Don’t need it.”

“This will do.” Straker put on the harness and adjusted it, and then hefted the blasters. “Time to kick some ass. Lead on.”

“Talking to yourself again?”

Straker coughed a laugh. “Loco would have a field day with this situation. Needling us.”

“Tell him I said hello. Or rather that you said hello... Whatever.”

Straker felt the irony, and the longer it went on while he marched with his artificial brother, the more it transformed into a sense of macabre tragedy. He accompanied a man created in his own image, closer than a twin brother, closer than Loco or Roentgen or anyone else in his life. At this very moment many more were out there, fighting and dying. They would perform their functions until, inevitably, they died. Whether that death came from violence or natural expiration, they weren’t destined to last as long as a mayfly.

Strangely, part of him wished he could die with them. That some other Derek Straker could carry on, live with Carla, raise the kids and even lead the Breakers. That would be easier. Dying would be simpler, cleaner, without guilt at his own mistakes, free of ambiguity—questions of who deserved to survive, who to die, regrets at what he’d done to win. Were his unsettled feelings about his unnatural brothers now leaning toward envy?

“How’s the battle going?” he asked the golem as they jogged from cellar to cellar, warehouse to warehouse. From time to time they killed Korven hatchlings, and tried to ignore the endless horror of the millions of

immobilized sentients, some of whom watched them with pleading, helpless eyes.

“We’re winning. Or at least, we’ll win in the end. The aerial support is what did it—that and a platoon of Uber-Dereks. The mechsuits ran out of ammo and fuel, and the battlesuiters are almost as bad off, but the skimmers and boats can strafe for hours—even fly out to refuel from *Trollheim* if necessary. Golems don’t need anything but rations. We brought along ten times the ammo and powerpacks we thought we’d need, and used two-thirds of it, but we have plenty left. Only lost three of us so far, too. If we lived a normal lifespan—hell, if we lived five years and the Breakers could make enough of us, we could overthrow Steel.” The golem’s voice held no hint of bitterness, only wistful acceptance.

Straker knew exactly how he felt. It was how he’d feel in the man’s place. “But we can’t do that. Copy myself endlessly... that’s what the Mutuality tried to do with the Lazarus and Tachina clones, and look where it got them. I’m not a god or superman to be replicated and turned into some master race. I’m a leader. Leading myself is redundant and narcissistic.”

The golem laughed gently. “It’s more important for one Derek Straker to do good, than for a million copies to destroy evil. I know that. We know that. That’s why we accept our fate. That’s why we know this is only temporary—and it should never be repeated.”

“It won’t be.”

“You say that now, but I know you’re tempted. The road to Hell is paved with good intentions. Look where we ended up, eh?” The golem glanced over at him with an enigmatic gaze, as if he knew something Straker didn’t.

But as he was made from Straker, that was impossible, wasn’t it?

“Where are we going?” Straker asked suddenly. “Aren’t we heading to finish off the Korven?”

“Like I said, they’re done. It’s just a matter of grinding them to dust over the next few hours. That’s not our job. You and I need to find Carla and the other Breaker women.”

“Right.” Straker wasn’t used to taking orders, to letting someone else lead—but the golem was him, after all, and the man’s certainty and determination was contagious.

Was this what others felt in Straker’s presence?

The composition of the creatures pinned to the racks was trending humanoid. No doubt the Axis of Predators used some kind of classification system similar to Crossroads, where they put similar environments next to each other and changed them gradually, section by section. And, it appeared they were mostly using creatures who lived in oxygen-nitrogen atmospheres, which were by far the most common type to sustain sentient life.

Straker followed along the lines of humanoids, feeling sick, so sick he could barely hold back from vomiting. The machinery that hung them in place like slabs of meat was connected to them, to their bodies in every orifice, feeding them, servicing them like bizarre organisms rather than people. Fortunately this section was undamaged, not traumatized by the battle. No hatchlings scampered around leaving bloody paw-prints. No babies lay dead from premature birthing.

Of those conscious, a few of the humanoids' faces were twisted with horror and recognition, but most were vacant, their humanity expunged, wrung out like dirty dishrags. Straker couldn't imagine... refused to imagine what they'd gone through. His mind shied away from it. He told himself Carla had only been there a few days. She hadn't had time to gestate a baby, and wouldn't have been implanted by a Korven.

These were his greatest fears, but he kept the possibilities firmly in the denial zone.

It hadn't happened. She could still be saved, could still be rescued, could be restored by Mara's machinery the way she'd been after Vic had held her hostage.

If necessary, her memories of the trauma could be wiped.

That's what he told himself, in order to preserve his hope.

There were thousands of people, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands in this vast underground warehouse, this factory. The horror struck him anew, because the victims here were standard Earthan humans. Somehow, that made it ten times worse.

His mind reeled, shutting down, compartmentalizing. That was the only way he could deal with the loathsome stomach-turning worry he felt now. Any lingering mercy he'd ever felt toward those who'd done this drained out of him and dried like a lakebed in a hot desert wind. It left nothing but bitter, burning salt crusted over his desiccated soul.

The next section was of men and boys, immobilized, implanted, and in various stages of parasite development. The eyes of a tiny fraction followed him. One man with a swollen belly mouthed words he couldn't understand. Straker raised his blaster to put the host out of his misery, but he couldn't pull the trigger. Who was he to play God? Maybe he could be saved.

It was a weak lie he told himself, but he tried to believe it anyway.

Impulsively, he shot the machine connected to the tubes and wires. That turned out to be a mistake. Unlike the bull earlier, this man began to thrash and scream in agony as the clawed thing inside him writhed.

So he shot the man after all, a mercy killing.

The scene seemed to recede from him, as if he looked through a faceplate, or a backup HUD, just a glass display, a vidset that could detach him from the actuality around him.

He turned away. Only his biotech kept him on his feet.

The golem grabbed his elbow, supporting him. "Come on. Keep it together, man. We need to find Carla!"

Unnoticed until now, a squad of four more golems had joined them. When they reached the next area, full of human women, they spread out searching for the Breakers. When they found conscious women who could speak coherently, those who yelled piteously at them for rescue, they detached them from the machines and slapped med-packs on them. Those unconscious, they left as they were. The freed ones would have to tend any who woke... if they survived.

Timeless minutes later, they found Carla and called Straker over.

Numb, his mind floating with shock, he dropped to his knees in front of her, staring at her face, that face he knew so well, the mother of his children...

Slack now with all the life drained out of it.

The locations where the organic tentacles connected to her were black and gangrenous. Nacreous fluids mixed with blood and dripped onto the floor. The machine that should have kept her alive beeped with alarm tones and flashed error messages.

There was no life in her. That much was clear. She'd been dead for hours—maybe days. The other five Breaker women were also dead, in the same state.

Yet all around them, most of the humans were alive. What was it? Their biotech? Had the Breaker Bug tried to defend them against the biological

machines invading them? Had the interaction killed them instead of saving them?

Straker found himself sobbing, dragging himself to his feet and reached out to touch her cold, lifeless face with his bare fingers.

Carla, my love, my all. I failed you. I'm so sorry.

Straker felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned his head to see golem 23. "I'm sorry, Derek," the artificial man said with eyes full of compassion. "She's gone, but she will never be forgotten."

"What good is that?" He tried to bat the hand away, but that was like striking iron.

The golem gripped his shoulder in sympathy. "Everybody dies. Me, in a couple of days. You, who knows? It's what heroes do. We live and we die, to protect our loved ones."

"But we *didn't* protect them. We failed. I failed."

"Mara told me to promise you this: your children will have a father and a mother. Derek and Carla Straker will raise them. Derek and Carla Straker will continue to lead and guide the Breakers, and the Breakers will fulfill their destiny. Derek and Carla Straker will return one day to free mankind."

"What?" In a daze, Straker swiveled his face from Carla's to the golem's and back. "That makes no sense. What does that even mean? She's dead. Gone."

When he felt the muzzle of the golem's blaster against the back of his head, his surprise was so complete he couldn't react. Even if he had, it would have been too late, for the hand that held the blaster was the hand of an artificial construct. It was just as fast and deadly as he was.

He found he welcomed what he knew would come next. He was glad of it.

The pain would end.

Someone else could carry it.

The click of the trigger was the last thing he heard.

Chapter 33

Hell's Reach. *SBS Trollheim.*

When Straker opened his eyes, he smelled the familiar hospital smell of a rejuvenation tank. Outside the clear canopy, though, he didn't see the infirmary. Instead, he found himself in a largish room containing at least twenty more operating rejuvenation tanks. Those were dark inside, with hints of occupants, barely seen.

He slapped the release, sat up, and saw Mara staring contemplatively at him. She looked haggard and weary, and her eyes red-rimmed and crusty.

"What's going on?" he asked.

He checked his chrono to see if the five minutes for the Breaker Bug boost were up. Instead, it showed more than twenty-four hours had passed. His mind reeled, and he tried to adjust.

"The battle's over, Derek. We won. You won. You and the golems and the troops. You saved millions of captives, but lost millions more. Those were unsavable, but we did what we could. My medical staff and I... we also did what we could..." She shook her head. "It wasn't enough."

"What do you mean *I* won? You said to hop in the tank for a Breaker Bug boost, and now I wake up here..."

Suspicion seized him by the scruff of the neck. He examined his hands, the left hand he'd known since childhood, the right one new and pink with regeneration after the fusing with Roentgen. "Am I me?"

Mara stiffened. "Stupid question. Examine yourself. Do you know who you are?"

"Why stupid?" He swung his legs down and stood in his uniform, the same uniform he'd been wearing when he went into the tank.

She crossed her arms and glared. "Because the answer is either obvious, or irrelevant."

"I feel like me. I'm in my uniform, I have my chrono, and it's my body... but you said *I* already won. But *I* didn't go."

"You did... and you didn't."

His mind cruised down the logical track. "Another me went in my place? A golem you created, except not a battle-optimized one? A copy of me, a disposable mechsuirer, because you thought I'd die?"

She glanced at the floor and didn't answer him.

“You tricked me into getting into the tank,” he said. “You sedated me, and you sent a copy in my place.”

“So what if I did?”

“So what? How can you say *so what*?”

“If I made a perfect copy, does it matter that he was a copy? If the copy was perfect? If it was disposable?”

“That’s... ” Straker couldn’t articulate his thoughts. “Insane.”

“Not insane, just hard to process. You had trouble with the Roentgens too, but it’s not that different. He fissioned, making two perfect copies. One happily goes off, maybe to die, as is his duty. The other stays back as insurance, to carry on. He fissions again, and again. Each time, a copy heads into dangers bordering on crazy—knowing that if he dies, he’s still alive elsewhere. It’s the best of both worlds. It’s brilliant, Derek, and it saved your life. And Carla’s. That’s all that matters to me.”

“Carla? I—the other me—he got her back?”

Mara glanced to the side. “She’s here.”

Straker thought he detected a hesitation, a hitch in Mara’s voice, but he let it pass, suddenly desperate to see Carla. “Where is she?”

Mara laid a hand on a closed tank, brushing it lightly. “She won’t have any memories of the last few days. Nothing after leaving on the trading run. It’s best that way.”

“Did you wipe her memory? Or was it physical damage?”

Mara shuddered. “You should be glad you never saw what they did down there. *This* you, anyway, never saw it. Not with your own eyes. The other Strakers... the golems—they saw. They wanted to pass something on to you before they expired.”

“Expired? You mean died.”

“If you insist.”

He lowered his head as a sense of sorrow and loss came over him.

“What did they say?”

“They said to thank you for their lives, however short. Because those lives were triumphant and meaningful. Because they accomplished something significant. They fought and won. They completed the mission. They got Carla back, and many more. They freed millions, and saved billions in the future. If you were them, you’d feel the same, Derek, because you have the same sense of duty and honor.”

That sounded like a prepared speech, designed to elicit a certain response from him. Mara was a pretty good actor, but she was still a brainiac, and the whole thing rang false.

Straker glared at her, feeling his rage rising. When he spoke, he made each word a complete sentence.

“You. Manipulative. Bitch.”

His words didn’t faze her, didn’t slap her in the face the way he’d intended. She simply continued talking. “All of us brainiacs are manipulative, Derek. Me, Zaxby, Sinden, Murdock, every one of us. It’s how we’re made. You always knew it. You could’ve exiled me or killed me or locked me up any time, though, and you didn’t, so don’t blame me for who I am.”

“I don’t. I blame myself.”

“Because that’s who you are.” Mara patted the tank again. “But because of this manipulative bitch, you’re here, and Carla’s here. Would you rather be dead? Or she was? Would you rather the Breakers were leaderless, or that Katrine and Johnny lost their parents?”

“The ends don’t always justify the means, Mara.”

“Hell yes they do. When the ends are important enough. For survival, or to destroy a greater evil, quite a lot is justified. That’s the very nature of war. You proved it when you committed treason against the Hundred Worlds government. Then again when you broke a childlike, innocent AI’s ethics and transformed her into a killer. Those are just a few instances that come to mind right off.”

Straker deflated. “I... Yeah, you’re right. I’m no better than you are.”

“And no worse. We all try to do good, but we all do what we have to do. Stop beating yourself up over it. Come on, Derek. Carla’s waiting.” She keyed in the opening code, and the tank hissed with equalizing pressure.

Slowly, the canopy rose. Straker leaned over and his heart ached as he gazed into Carla’s face. The feeling of love and joy washed away all the anger he felt toward Mara, leaving nothing but relief at his wife’s rescue.

Her eyes opened. “Derek?”

“Carla...” He kissed her gently.

“What’s going on?”

“That’s a long story. A very long story. For right now, just let me look at you.”

* * *

Later, after he'd told the story to a wondering Carla, Straker called together his surviving troops—forty-three battlesuiters and four mechsuiters—for a private meal and conversation, for the unfiltered reports and war stories of troops when they were relaxed and had a few beers in them.

What Straker learned disturbed him all over again.

When he'd gotten his thoughts in order, he returned to the infirmary, and Mara's office.

"Take a seat, sis," he said, his stare flat, his demeanor steely and cold.

"What is it now, Derek?" she said with irritation as she threw herself into her chair.

He shut the door and stood over her, silent. His hands worked with renewed, restrained anger.

Mara eyed him. "Is this an interrogation? Are you still pissed that I saved Carla's life?"

"*Did* you?"

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I have people telling me Carla was *dead*. That they saw the golems carrying her bloated body away. That they saw the other Breaker women, just as dead, still hanging there."

"They must have misunderstood. The others were dead, but the golems got Carla back in time. I revived her. You know how amazing the rejuvenation tank is."

"No. I saw the helmet-vid. She was *dead*. Nobody looks like that and lives. And the others didn't survive, so why would Carla?" He slammed his palm on the desk, leaving dents. "*What the fuck did you do?*"

Mara sighed, fiddling with a stylus, not meeting his gaze. "I told her not to go," she muttered.

"Go where?"

She raised her eyes, and her voice strengthened, rising as she stood and spoke, leaning forward, nose to nose. "I said, I told her not to go. That my sister-in-law, the commander of the fleet, didn't need to go on trading runs and expose herself to danger. Or at least if she went, to command a cruiser as an escort, but *no-o-o*, that was inefficient and expensive and she was the boss and a grownup and she could judge the relative risk and she was sick and tired hanging around Utopia, and *look what fucking happened!*"

“Mara—”

Mara straightened, crossed her arms under her breasts. Her eyes held tears, tears of shame and anger—and apology. “Do you blame me?”

“I don’t know what I’m blaming you for, sis, but I need answers.”

“You know the answers.”

“Then I want to confirm them.”

She put her hands over her eyes and rubbed her temples. “Go on. Say what you need to say.”

“You copied Carla. Built a new one. Like a golem. Like you did with me.”

“Yeah. I did. The best copies I could make, with long lifespans.”

“And then you sent off the copy... and kept the original Carla in stasis? Just like you sent my copy off to battle and kept me here?”

Mara jerked her head, her eyes narrowing before her face smoothed to blandness. She rubbed the tears out of her eyes. “Yeah, I admit it,” she said. “That’s what I did. You got me.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before now? I was going crazy thinking about her.”

“Sparing you emotional pain isn’t my job, Derek. I only cared about getting our people back.”

“And you thought I wouldn’t try as hard if it was ‘merely’ some other Breakers taken?”

Mara shook her head. “Of course not. But it did serve to keep you extremely focused.”

This time, he spoke in a flat and weary voice. “You manipulative bitch.”

“You said that already... and it is what it is. Take it or leave it.”

Straker stared at her, wishing wholeheartedly he could do something—court-martial her, punish her somehow—except he owed her so much.

He owed her Carla.

“How’d you bring her here? And how’d you know you needed to?”

Mara shrugged, sat, and idly rubbed at a spot on her desk. “I didn’t know, but I’m a Mental Special. I think ten moves ahead, plan for every contingency if I can. As you saw, I had a lot more rejuvenation tanks than anyone knew about. They can regenerate someone from the DNA up, as long as I have a download of their brainlinked mind in subquantum storage. Or I can keep a copy in stasis for years. When we sent off the message drone to call the fleet to Humbar, I added in special instructions to secretly

load all the tanks onto *Trollheim*, keeping them powered at all times. Then, with Zaxby's help and that of a few of his Ruxins sworn to secrecy, we requisitioned and prepped this hidden bay and deleted it from the ship's schematics."

It all made sense, but Straker felt like there was still something Mara wasn't telling him. She was being cagey—all brainiacs were like that. They all thought they were smarter than anyone else. Okay, they were, technically—but not as much as they thought. He paced back and forth, trying to find the flaw, but couldn't—yet.

But he would, eventually.

He took his leave without saying any more.

To divert himself from brooding over the implications of Mara's actions, he headed for the bridge. The few crew he saw—the passageways seemed strangely empty—greeted him along the way with broad smiles and more cheerfulness than seemed warranted. He attributed it to winning a battle, plus the day they'd had to rest and recover.

On the bridge, an equally cheerful Captain Salishan stood. "Flag on deck!"

"At ease, carry on," Straker replied automatically, glancing around at the skeleton crew. None of the secondary stations were manned, and several primaries, such as Damage Control, were also empty of crew.

"Good to see you up and around, sir."

"The rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated." He wondered what they'd heard, what gossip had been circulating. Word of his appearance with his troops should have percolated throughout the ship, but hearing was one thing: seeing was quite another.

Seeing was *believing*.

That's what they say, he thought. But not always.

"Those rejuvenation tanks are amazing," he continued, holding up his hands, waggling his fingers and rotating his wrists as if to show off his recovery.

"Doctor Straker did heroic work on everyone," Salishan replied, and the few watchstanders there applauded spontaneously. "She's promised to restore all the wounded to duty within a few days."

"How many of your crew did we lose?"

"Fifty-six. Plus battlesuiters."

Straker frowned at the number. It had to be higher—but maybe Mara had been cheating even more than she let on. He decided to go with it.

“Over one hundred fallen Breakers,” he said loudly. “A high price, but worth it to save many more. We’ll carry our remains home to Utopia and honor them there.”

Those around him cast their eyes down and muttered in approval.

“Good news about the wounded, though,” he continued. “We’re lucky to have the medical tech.” He was speechifying for the benefit of the audience, but it seemed to be working.

Salishan’s brow furrowed. “Yes, sir... but there’s a problem. I have more than half the crew down on the surface, but we’re losing captives faster than we can rescue them. The machines are malfunctioning, people are waking up and panicking, and those spawn are ripping their way out before we can reach all of them. Even though we’re setting the freed captives to helping, there’s not enough of anything. Not enough food, not enough medical supplies, not enough hands to disconnect people and save them from rotting in place. And even once we free them, what will we do with them? We can’t possibly take them all aboard.”

“How long can they survive here once they’re freed?”

“Our estimates? Five days. Some more, some less, depending on their particular environment.”

“What do our brainiacs say?”

“Sinden and Mara agree. Zaxby doesn’t seem to want to talk to me, and *Redwolf* has disappeared.”

Straker growled in his throat. “Comms, wideband comlink hail, FTL and conventional. Straker to Zaxby. Respond immediately. Set that to repeat until he does.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“Mercy, have you run the numbers on shuttling rescued people through the wormhole into the butterfly collector system and setting them down on the green worlds?”

“Yes, sir. Twenty thousand a day maximum. Even if we load to standing room only like cattle, with zero food and water, we’re millions short—and that would only rescue the humanoids.”

“Regardless, I want transport runs started ASAP. Better to save a few thousand than none at all.”

“It’ll take at least twelve hours for the first load. And there are fuel issues. We’ll have to recall all the landers and personnel from their work. It means saving those ready to flee right now, at the expense of others still hooked up.”

He sighed and rubbed his neck, frustrated. “I know. Get started on it anyway.”

“Aye aye, sir.” Salishan began issuing orders.

Straker turned to the holotank, which showed the system—its one worldlet which *Trollheim* orbited, its massive black hole around which the planetoid spun, a few comets and asteroids around the far edges—and the wormhole linking to the butterfly collector system with its attendant singularity. He chewed his lower lip and sucked his teeth for a moment in contemplation.

Wormhole.

Singularity.

Black hole.

A black hole was just a big singularity, one created by nature instead of by some intelligent agency. His conversation with Zaxby before the battle established the idea that the Predators intended to use this black hole to generate a wormhole big enough to send the planetoid through —when everything was ready, years in the future. Lucky thing—in a very broad sense, not lucky for the Breakers personally—that their plans were thwarted.

“Have we found evidence of machinery to generate a wormhole off that black hole?” he asked into the air.

“Not yet,” Salishan replied. “We’ve had no spare personnel to do a tech survey. We’re trying to save lives.”

Straker waved his hand in dismissal. “Rightly so, but a wormhole big enough for this planetoid might be the only way to save those lives before times runs out.”

“That’s—” Clearly, Salishan was going to say “impossible,” but she suppressed it. “Yes sir... How?”

“Only one guy I know could possibly pull it off,” Straker said with a glance upward at the overhead, where various items most people forgot about resided: projectors, vents—and vid and voice pickups. “If he could, he’d really be a hero.”

“I accept your challenge!” said Zaxby’s voice from above. As expected, the cagey Ruxin had been listening in before responding to the automated comlink hail. Simultaneously, *Redwolf*’s icon appeared in the holotank next to *Trollheim* as Zaxby dropped stealth mode. “Though as a fair-minded being, I must give primary credit to Roentgen. He was able to establish communication with the system engineer, the ‘butterfly collector,’ which calls itself Watcher. ‘Observer’ or ‘Researcher’ is probably more accurate, but Roentgen is a romantic at heart and likes the poetic ring of *Watcher*.”

Straker gripped the rail in excitement. “I need to talk to Watcher. Pick me up on the flight deck.”

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Chapter 34

Roentgen, aboard *Redwolf*-ship.

Roentgen observed his fuse-mate Straker as he walked with the strange, high-limbed grace of a primate into the circular control area of *Redwolf*-ship. The four-limbs always seemed as if they would fall over at any moment, balanced on their lower extremities. At least Ruxins had a proper eight limbs, though they were undifferentiated into upper and lower halves like one of the People.

Aliens were so strange, it made him dizzy—sometimes giddy, sometimes tremendously depressed. How could he ever come to understand them?

But he almost understood Straker, having undergone the fusing. From the human's dreams and impressions he'd glimpsed another set of sensory organs. Eyes were not so strange—limited to a narrow EM spectrum, yet amazingly fine within it—the colors!

But ears! Organs that could perceive vibration—called “sound”—opened up an entirely new dimension of meaning, so limited in distance, but so sensitive and rich and thrilling! Voices—and music! Ethereal, transporting!

And the sense called “smell!” Astounding!

At first he'd wondered how humans had survived in their thin skins, with vulnerable organs and inability to see through objects, until he realized their environments were gentle and protected rather than harsh and demanding like Thoria's. Humans wrapped themselves in sheltered and bounded bubbles, carefully constructed ships, and suits designed to protect themselves instead of others. Every day their fragile lives seemed to bring risk of immediate death, with no fission-siblings to carry on.

So brave!

And what's more, each human was utterly unique. Roentgen mourned for all the humans who had died without passing on their memories to fission-siblings. Yet somehow, each new human who arose acquired the possibility of generating unique and exceptional life experiences, and recording them, however incompletely, for the next generation. It seemed a lonely and forlorn existence, with no fission-twins to create a real family. Instead of coming into existence fully formed, they had to generate and

educate offspring over years, barely able to teach them a fraction of their knowledge before dying after perhaps a mere century.

So inferior... and yet somehow they'd achieved such greatness. It was a puzzle worth lifetimes of study.

And today, Roentgen might witness more greatness. He would have the honor of being the translator and living transceiver between Straker and Watcher. How fortunate he was to be here! His fission-siblings would rejoice for him.

"Zaxby, take us to Watcher," Straker commanded.

"We're already on our way," Zaxby replied, and Roentgen saw it was true. *Redwolf*-ship arrowed toward the wormhole leading to the engineered system, the terminus of many wormholes, the location of the Watcher inside the cool white sun.

"Roentgen, tell me about Watcher."

Roentgen turned his designated suit-front to Straker—designated, because his suit had no "front," any more than Roentgen himself did. He'd had Zaxby make a few marks resembling the symmetrical front of a human space-suit—hints of a faceplate, a nametag in Earthan—and took care to aim this pattern at whatever human he conversed with. It seemed to make them more comfortable.

"I had very little time to speak with it. I believe it is a single being of great intellect, far greater than our own. It appears to share some attributes of an AI, although that might be an illusion brought about by our perspective."

"Illusion?" Straker asked.

"To small intelligences, all larger intelligences might appear to be much the same."

When he'd fused with Straker, Roentgen had gained the ability to interpret human facial expressions. At this time, Straker's displayed annoyance. "I don't accept that we're smaller."

"Yet it is a fact. We are individually smaller in intellect, if not in significance. There is no shame in it. We must accept the situation as it is."

"No we don't. I've spent my life changing situations I don't like. Right now, we have millions of innocent people on a death-clock. I don't like that. There's one being who might have the power to save them: Watcher. So again, tell me about it. Is it arrogant? Emotional? Purely rational? What does it care about? Come on, Roentgen. Help me!"

Roentgen reoriented his mind to Straker's desires and tried to convey his limited impressions of Watcher. "I believe curiosity is its primary motivation. If it has emotions, they support and reinforce curiosity. It desires to observe living things and what they do, rather than merely investigate physical phenomena. I postulate that the green worlds in its system are laboratories where it has placed various collected species in order to observe how they interact."

"Does it care who lives or dies, or does it just observe?"

"I'm not sure."

Straker paced. "So it's like a rich guy with a fenced biological preserve, importing species and creating a menagerie. Lions and tigers and bears... and the things they eat, like deer. And the plants the deer eat, and so on. The big question is, when the tigers and bears fight, does it care who wins? If the lions eat all the deer, does it matter to Watcher? Or does it shrug, record what happened, and go collecting something new to play with?"

"I do not know. And yet..." Roentgen said thoughtfully.

"What?"

"I would suggest that most collectors and researchers have incentives to preserve their specimens—in the aggregate if not individually."

"You mean while it may not care about any single specimen, it won't let the whole population get wiped out—otherwise, it loses a unique part of its collection."

"Perhaps." Roentgen strongly wished he could provide Straker with more answers, but his brief communication with Watcher had been taken up with figuring out the language and methodology, not actually passing informational memes or in conversing.

"Okay... that's a start."

Soon, *Redwolf*-ship had passed through the wormhole, and Zaxby turned them toward a position of communication interception—between a singularity and the star.

This turned out not to be necessary. Roentgen suddenly saw and felt a blast of neutrinos aimed directly at *Redwolf*-ship, a searchlight of visible, tactile speech a human might call a megaphone yelling at him.

"CEASE MOVEMENT AND CONVERSE," the "voice" of Watcher said.

"Come to relative rest and hold position," Roentgen told Zaxby. "We have Watcher's attention."

“Tell it who I am, and that we need its help,” Straker said.

“I will translate your words directly, fuse-mate Straker. Speak to me as if to Watcher, and when you hear me speak, it will be Watcher’s words—unless I say otherwise.”

“Understood. Tell it.”

Roentgen calmed his mind and mentally removed himself from between Watcher and Straker, becoming a living transceiver of conversation:

“I am Straker, leader of the beings which defeated the Predators in the next system. We need your help.”

I AM WATCHER. WHY SHOULD I EXPEND EFFORT TO HELP YOU?

“I know you’re curious about us and what goes on in and near your domain. You must also be curious about what goes on outside this nebula.”

I AM CURIOUS, BUT I UNDERSTAND FAR MORE THAN YOU ABOUT EVERYTHING. WHAT CAN YOU GIVE ME THAT I CANNOT TAKE FOR MYSELF?

“Intimate knowledge of living creatures. You sent your wormhole to bring my ship here, and you observed our interactions with the Predators—our battles. But can you see what’s going on within our ships? Can you see into our minds? Do you know our motivations? I don’t think so.”

WHY SHOULD I CARE ABOUT YOUR MOTIVATIONS?

“Because those are infinitely interesting. You can infer reasons and motivations from behavior, but only approximately. Wouldn’t you rather speak directly to the creatures you observe?”

INTERACTING WITH THEM CHANGES THEIR BEHAVIOR. OBSERVATION IS A PURER ART.

“Yet you’re speaking with us.”

YOU HAVE FOUND A WAY TO COMMUNICATE WITH ME. THIS IS INTERESTING ENOUGH TO SULLY THE PURITY OF MY OBSERVATION.

“Sullied purity... So you’re an imperfect being, like us.”

LIKE YOU? NO. IMPERFECT? WHO EXISTS WITHOUT IMPERFECTION? PERFECTION WOULD BE INFINITELY BORING, DON’T YOU THINK?

“That’s a question for philosophers. Right now, I need to save lives. For that, I need your help.”

I AM AMUSED. WHAT DO YOU PROPOSE?

“There are millions of sentient beings trapped on a planetoid on the other side of the wormhole—the one where we fought, the one formerly of the Predators. We don’t have the resources to save them. You could—by sending one of your wormholes to bring the planetoid to this system, to add it to your menagerie. If you put the planetoid in orbit above your most compatible green world, we could shuttle them to the surface and many would survive.”

THIS WOULD TAKE SIGNIFICANT RESOURCES OF MINE. HOW DOES IT BENEFIT ME?

“You could observe and interact with many new species at your whim. It would take months or years to organize satisfactory transport to eventually remove them all from the nebula and return them to their homes. Some may even choose to stay.”

WHY SHOULD IT INTEREST ME TO DO THIS IF I ALLOW ANY TO LEAVE?

“You have the power to compel us to stay, I suppose. I don’t know if you have any morals beyond self-interest, but allowing traffic and commerce would bring you a near-infinite stream of living beings to observe.”

SELF-INTEREST, YES. THIS INTRIGUES ME. WHAT IS YOUR SELF-INTEREST HERE?

“Some of these rescued people are under my command, so I’m responsible. Others are innocents. I’m trying to do the right thing, but it’s also in my self-interest to rescue them. It will improve many relationships

with my organization. Their homeworlds and people will owe us a debt. We will profit directly and indirectly. That's how trade and commerce work. Many of us also believe in doing good for its own sake, and because it makes us feel better. Some even believe there are divine forces beyond the natural world, forces which reward good deeds."

DIVINE FORCES? THAT'S PREPOSTEROUS. BY DEFINITION, THERE IS NOTHING BEYOND THE NATURAL WORLD.

"Yet aren't you curious about what people believe, and why they believe it? What evidence might they have for such preposterous beliefs? How useful might such beliefs be, even if preposterous? These things are examples of new ways of thinking that you may not have ever experienced or observed before."

I MUST PONDER THIS...

"For how long?"

IN MY PERCEPTION, QUITE A LONG TIME. IN YOURS, ONLY SECONDS... NOW, MY THOUGHTS ARE COMPLETE.

"Great. Go on."

I FIND YOU INTERESTING.

"Yeah, I hoped you would."

I SUSPECT YOU MISUNDERSTAND. I MEAN, I FIND YOU YOURSELF INTERESTING—PERSONALLY, YOU.

"He is referring to you specifically, fuse-brother," Roentgen added to clarify.

"Okay... "

I WILL HELP YOU ON ONE CONDITION.

"What's that?"

YOU MUST STAY HERE WITH ME.

"I'll have to think about that."

FOR HOW LONG?

“Longer than you. Minutes, at least. Stand by.”

Straker paused for long moments, clearly contemplating. Roentgen found himself falling out of the immersive state he’d occupied while translating, coming to awareness once again.

Zaxby wagged the fronds of his subtentacles in a come-hither manner, and Straker walked over to where the Ruxin perched on a padded stool. Zaxby whispered something in Straker’s ear, something Roentgen could not perceive, something out of the range of his suit’s vibrational sensors.

After Zaxby’s unknown words, Straker nodded, put on a bland expression, and spoke.

“You have a deal. I’ll stay with you, as long as you don’t interfere with my actions to lead and organize the people here—and you let anyone who wants to leave do so when that becomes feasible.”

AGREED. I WILL BRING THE PLANETOID TO THE MOST COMPATIBLE OF MY GREEN WORLDS.

“I’ll get started organizing the landing.”

THERE WILL BE NO NEED. I HAVE SUFFICIENT CONTROL OF LOCAL GRAVITY THAT I WILL SIMPLY LAND THE PLANETOID UPON THE SURFACE SO THEY CAN DISEMBARK.

“Uh... okay. How long can you hold it there? Because even I know as soon as you turn off the gravity control, the planet and planetoid will crush together and there’ll be a cataclysm.”

THAT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO OBSERVE.

“You can’t do that!”

I CAN, ACTUALLY, BUT I WON’T. IT WOULD KILL TOO MANY SPECIMENS. I CAN KEEP THE PLANETOID SAFELY TOUCHING THE SURFACE OF THE GREEN WORLD FOR AS LONG AS NECESSARY TO DISEMBARK.

“And to carry everything they can salvage onto the green world surface? It may take months.”

I GIVE YOU FIVE MONTHS, IN YOUR RECKONING. AFTER THAT, I WILL SEND THE PLANETOID BACK TO ITS CURRENT POSITION.

“Agreed.”

THEN WE ARE FINISHED HERE.

“Wait—how will I communicate with you in the future?”

IF IT BECOMES NECESSARY, THE ROENTGEN-CREATURE PROVIDES AN ADEQUATE CONDUIT.

“That means he’ll have to stay.”

THAT IS YOUR DECISION. THIS CONVERSATION IS OVER.

“It’s gone,” Roentgen said, feeling the emptiness of the lack of the massive neutrino-voice. “Never fear, friend Derek. I will fission and one of me will stay here with you. If we can locate radioactive ores, I can even reproduce further and form a colony of Thorians. It will be a grand adventure!”

“I wouldn’t have thought of it that way, but now that you say it, yeah, it is.” Straker strode near to clasp hands briefly—with the suit between them, of course, a pale imitation of fusing, but nonetheless a moving gesture. “I’ll be happy to have one or more of you here.”

“Thank you. Please move away, Derek. You are being damaged.”

“Only a little. My biotech will handle it.” After one more squeeze of his extremity, Straker wisely moved to a safe distance.

“I am curious also,” Roentgen said. “What did Zaxby say to you to help you decide?”

Straker exchanged glances with Zaxby. “He pointed out that I can fission too.”

“That’s not possible. It is not within the reproductive methods of your species.”

“Our brainiacs adapted subquantum tech to the point they can make near-perfect copies of human beings, using rejuvenation tanks.”

Joy suffused Roentgen's physical processes. "That is delightful news. Now, you can be like us!"

"Yeah... great."

"You are not pleased?"

"No. It's unnatural for me. But to save millions, I'm willing to do something unnatural." Straker turned to Zaxby. "You and Mara will make a copy of me. Another copy, with a full lifespan. Roentgen will fission, as he said. We'll leave the two here to fulfill the bargain."

Zaxby smiled broadly.

"What are you grinning about?" Straker asked.

"I'm enjoying the ease with which you compromise your silly human moral principles."

"For a brainiac, you're pretty stupid, Zaxby."

"I reject that assessment. Why do you make it?"

"Because I'm not compromising my principles—I'm upholding them. I'm making a hard choice for the greater good—one only I have the right to make. When Mara copied me without permission, that was wrong. If she was so sure it was necessary, she should have asked me. I'd probably have agreed. Instead, she made the golems and copied me without permission and only explained it all after the fact. That's wrong. This is right, because I'm making the decision about my own self. That's what most morality comes down to—who has the power to choose and control their own lives."

"Ah. As in, 'The difference between a Contractor and an employee is the power to quit.' I stand corrected. You are placing principles above personal qualms. That is wise and admirable—worthy of a Ruxin."

"Gee, thanks. Now get this ship moving."

"To where?"

"Back through the wormhole. We need to tell our forces what's about to happen."

Roentgen anticipated more adventure to come. It pleased him immensely.

Chapter 35

Watcher system. Straker, aboard *Redwolf*.

Redwolf's circular control center provided Straker with a breathtaking view of the planetoid's appearance above Watcher's designated green world, the largest one. The end of an enormous wormhole spat it out suddenly, and the hole disappeared, leaving the sphere floating close above the planet like a falling moon.

Only, the moon did not fall. It drifted down slowly, slowly, like a balloon gently landing, pushing the thin envelope of the atmosphere aside until the two bodies touched.

Zaxby piloted *Redwolf* close to the process, obviously fascinated—so close in fact Straker had to order him to back off, in case something went wrong and the yacht got caught in the process of gravity control. The stupendous scale became awe-inspiring at close range, the grand curve of the planetoid forming a roof above the low mountains where it rested.

"How will the people get down?" Straker asked, staring at the point of contact. "What's the gravity doing?"

Zaxby zoomed the view in. "It appears that where the two bodies touch, the gravity remains congruent with the surfaces of each—as if each body were gravplated. With reasonable care, people will be able to simply walk from the planetoid onto the planet."

"What about the atmospheres?"

"The planet's atmosphere is encroaching on the planetoid's. The two will mix, and eventually the planet's atmosphere will become the planetoid's—like a lake joining with an ocean. In fact, it will make everything easier."

Straker stroked his jaw. "Seems like Watcher is being good."

"Good? You reduce things to such simple terms."

"It's one of my strengths. Helps me think clearly about what matters."

Zaxby waved airily. "Watcher is being benevolent, perhaps, in this situation—but it's not wise to forget it cares little about 'good.'"

"Noted. Is the situation stable?"

"There are high winds at the intersection point. They will settle within hours."

The comlink pinged for attention, and the ship's SAI announced, "Incoming comlink from *Trollheim*."

"Put it through."

"Salishan to Straker."

"Straker here."

"We've just transited through the wormhole—the original one. I didn't want to risk accompanying the planetoid."

"Good. Keep doing what you're doing—rescuing the people. Get them shuttled over to some likely settlement spot on the planet."

"General..." Captain Salishan said. "What you did was impressive, to get Watcher to do this, but..."

"But the rescued people are still in a tough spot, I know," he said.

"They'll be trying to survive with few tools, hardly any ready food..."

"Thousands will still die—of starvation, exposure, lack of medical care, possibly new diseases. Hundreds of thousands, probably. Sinden says we'll save eighty percent of them, but..."

"I know," Straker said. "We can only do what we can."

"I have a suggestion, sir. It's radical, I warn you."

"Tell me."

"What if I... set *Trollheim* down? On the surface?"

"She's not designed for that."

"You're right—she'd never lift again. Not under her own power. But, with *Trollheim*'s resources and personnel as a base and center, we'll help the settlers survive. We still have three skimmers to do the work of ships. Someone, probably you and Admiral Engels, should go back to Utopia on *Redwolf*. I'll stay here with the crew."

"Actually, I'll be staying too. I'll explain later." Straker would tell Salishan about the copy of himself he intended to leave here, but nobody else. People knew about the golems, but he'd try to keep the secret of perfect copies a little longer. Besides, he hadn't told Watcher either. Hopefully the being wouldn't notice one Straker departed while another stayed.

"But you're right," he continued. "Set *Trollheim* down. We'll send *Redwolf* back to Utopia, and order a task force to bring tools and supplies ASAP. All we have to do is keep people alive for the few weeks that takes."

"Understood. I've got work to do, sir. Anything else?"

"No, carry on. Great job, Mercy."

“Thank you, sir. Salishan out.”

Zaxby had left during the conversation, so Straker sat in an obscenely comfortable chair and put his feet up. Murdock had really gone all-out with the luxury on the yacht. He made a note to have Colonel Keller audit the brainiac’s budget and expenditures, and took the moment to simply relax and think.

The door to the yacht’s bridge slid open and Carla entered, tentatively, running her hands down her tunic as if to smooth it. She glanced around. Straker put his feet on the deck and stood to take her in his arms. “Good to see you, my love.”

Carla kissed him absently. “Yeah... good to see me too. After reviewing everything that’s happened, I have a weird feeling of disconnection. I went into Mara’s tank on Utopia, yesterday to me, weeks ago to all of you. I wake up in another tank halfway across the galaxy, and find out a copy of me went on the mission in my place—and she’s dead. She experienced unspeakable horrors, and here I am, untouched. It doesn’t make me feel good.”

“Survivor’s guilt. I know how you feel.”

“I heard about that too. Your golems.”

Straker tried to set Carla in a chair, but she disengaged from him to meander around the spacious bridge, taking in the three-sixty view, not meeting his eyes. “I’m fine,” she said. “Stop treating me like I’m made of glass. Remember, none of that happened to *me*. I was lying in a tank, doing exactly nothing while you’ve been busy saving the universe again.”

“Yeah, okay, it’s strange what happened. It’s hard to think about you as untouched, though. I wasn’t trying to save the universe—I was trying to save you. And I failed. And as it turned out, I didn’t even need to try. Mara could’ve simply woken you up and saved me the sweat. I’d still have gone after the other Breakers, of course, but I didn’t have to go half out of my mind with worry.”

Carla rubbed her arms and shivered, staring at something in the illusion of distance. “I don’t know. How would you have felt about it if she told you? How would I, if you woke me up? I’d like to think we’d have been just as concerned about the other Carla. If we weren’t... what would that say about us? If we can make expendable copies, aren’t we just as bad as the Korven, or the Mutuality with the Hok—creating living beings as pawns and puppets?”

“Or like the Hundred Worlds? They genetically engineered and raised us to be perfect warriors.”

Carla shuddered yet again. “And what if we’d rescued that other Carla after all? What would have become of her?”

“We don’t have to answer that question,” Straker replied.

“Because she’s *dead*. That’s piling evil on more evil! Everybody keeps saying ‘I had to do it.’ Derek, when do we say no?”

Straker wrapped his arms around her from behind, feeling her curves, which fit him perfectly. “We say no when the fate of millions isn’t at stake, I guess. Or even the thousands of Breakers under our command. I can see why leaders go prematurely gray. But really, tech is just tech. It’s just tools. It’s what we do with them that matters. And whatever we do, we can only do our best to use those tools for good.”

“But what’s *good*?”

“That’s the big question, isn’t it? One that people have been trying to answer down through the ages. For now, *this* is good. You and me and the work in front of us. And there’s one hell of a lot to do.”

“Yeah. I was thinking... we have a lot of space on Utopia. Ten planetary surfaces’ worth or more. Room for billions. There’s a bunch of people here. A few may stay, a lot will want to go home—and that’s good. It will spread the word of what the Breakers did. But some might want to settle on Utopia. We could use more people. We should offer them citizenship.”

Straker snorted with amusement. “Citizenship. We don’t have citizenship. No constitution, no process, no legal status for civilians... we’ve just been winging it over the last year.”

“Then obviously that needs to change. We need a population base, manufacturing, commerce... a real society beyond one Italian-descended town and one regimented military unit. Someplace our kids can grow up in, with a full range of opportunities, or what’s the point?”

Straker let go of her and deliberately sat in his chair again, gesturing at another for her to take a seat. “The golem Prime said something to me. I guess he was able to articulate what I’ve always known, but wasn’t willing to say.”

“What’s that?”

“Eventually, I have to go back.”

“Back?” She sat suddenly, gripping the arms of the chair. “Back to the Republic?”

“Yes. I can’t leave humanity ruled by a dictator—by a traitor, a backstabber, a humanopt agent.”

“You had your chance once, Derek, when you were on top. You turned everything over to the civilians, and look what happened.”

“Civilians have to rule themselves—in the long run. Military rule never works. I did the right thing, Carla, but I did it the wrong way. The problem wasn’t what was done, but *how* it was done. I see that now. I broke the system, and then I left it too fragile, with a power vacuum. Next time I’ll keep power for long enough to establish a stable representative government, with checks and balances and a solid constitution.”

“*Next time?* Derek Straker, when do we get to settle down? To raise the kids? To have some peace?”

“We weren’t made for peace,” he said. “At least, not for a hands-off peace, with us on the sidelines. We tried it for five years, tried to hide from war, but war came after us anyway. No, the only way to have peace is to impose it, insist on it, enforce it. *Si vis pacem, para bellum.*”

“If you want peace, prepare for war?”

“Yes. As for our kids, they’ll be raised by two wonderful parents. Other than that, they’ll do what children have always done—grow up and become individuals. And we’ll be proud of them, no matter what.”

“That’s a great vision, but... you want to depose Steel and rule the Republic? I’d say you need to prove you can rule Utopia first, Derek. And to do that, we need people. A lot of them.”

“If we bring people, there will be more commerce. The secret of Utopia’s location will eventually get out. That means more defenses, more interaction, more danger, more Breaker military jobs. If we do this, we both need to be all-in on it. Committed. You were asking about peace... but it won’t be peaceful. It’s going to be a huge, messy management job.”

“I know...” she sighed. “And I’ll be right by your side. We have top people to help. We’ll get more. People will amaze you, Derek. They’ll step up. And we have the basis for an interspecies alliance now. The Humbar, the Thorians, the Salamanders and more. And don’t forget, we may have thwarted the Axis of Predators in this master plan of theirs, but they’re still out there, and they’re gonna be pissed.”

“I know.” Straker took a deep breath, and then let it out. “Let’s think about it, talk it over with everyone. It’s not my decision alone.”

“Don’t kid yourself. You’re the boss. They’ll follow you.”

“They will. That’s why it’s so important to ask for their input.”

“If you want my input,” Zaxby declared as he ambled in, “the way forward is clear. Develop Utopia and the Breakers into an independent power while I—with a little help from Murdock and a few others—investigate this wormhole technology. Once we’re able to create and control FTL wormholes, we build and assemble a coalition sufficiently powerful to seize the Republic once more. You will become Emperor Derek Straker the First, and you will be succeeded by an infinite line of copies of yourself, stretching forward throughout time. Eventually you will bring the entire galaxy under your benevolent rule, with rejuvenated or copied Carlas and Zaxbys and Locos always by your side.”

Straker guffawed, almost choking with the ridiculousness of the suggestion. “Think bigger, Zaxby. Why not the universe!”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Derek Straker. There is much work to be done before that.”

* * *

Loco knocked on the door to Chiara’s tiny cabin aboard *Cassiel*. Was it still *his* cabin? He hadn’t slept in it, slept with her, since he’d disembarked days ago. A bunk in *Trollheim*’s officer country had been enough while he was coordinating the anti-boarding defense during the battle, containing and destroying the few Korven incursions that managed to get through, and then helping with the work afterward.

The door opened and Chiara’s dull, annoyed face peered out. “What?”

“Good morning to you too. Mind if I come in?” He didn’t wait for an answer, but edged in and sat on the bunk, putting his feet up on the rumpled, unwashed covers.

Chiara lay back down and buried her face in a pillow. “Just let me sleep, Loco.”

“You’ve been sleeping for days. It’s time to come back.”

“Come back where?”

“To life.” He leaned over to kiss the nape of her neck where silky black hair grew. “Come back to me.”

“Don’t want to,” she said, pulling the pillow over her head.

“I know. But I need you. We all need you.”

“Why? I’m all fucked up, Loco. Why would anyone want me, care about me? I have so many wounds, I feel like that’s all I’m made of. You should take Bel and go be happy. Leave me alone.”

“She’s not the one I want. She’s not you.”

“That proves you’re an idiot,” she said.

“Maybe,” Loco admitted. “I had some time to think things over, talk things over with Bel, and we figured out why you got mad.”

Chiara turned over to look up at him. “Really?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t because you were jealous of Belinda. It was because you thought it made no sense for me to love you instead of her. That I must be lying, or crazy, to say I want you more than I want her. And that in your mind, I’d eventually leave you for her. Which would prove you were right all along—that you think you’re not worthy of love.”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

“It’s not true, Chiara,” Loco insisted. “People don’t fall in love by some attractiveness-ranking system. They don’t suddenly fall out of love because they see someone cuter or easier to get along with. I love you, not her.”

She sat up, running her fingers through her hair and rubbing her eyes. “My head understands you, but my heart... my gut, maybe, doesn’t. I’m a total mess. I fight and I bluster because I’m afraid of you and your love. I try to control everything because I’m afraid of everything. I can’t get close to anyone because I’m afraid of getting close. I hurt the people I love because I’m afraid of getting hurt.”

“If you can admit that and work on it, then we’ll be fine.”

“My relationships never last.”

“This one will. But you have to believe, and hope—and pray. Praying is a thing with you, right? Maybe I’ll pray, too.”

Chiara snorted. “What? Loco is going to convert?”

Loco shrugged. “Maybe. I can see some advantages, starting with making you feel more secure.”

“You can’t do something so important just because of me. You have to do it for yourself, Loco.”

“No promises—but my mind is open. In fact, I’m the most openminded guy you’ll ever meet.”

“You just want what you want.”

“Is that wrong? If I want something good for myself and for you?”

Chiara shook her head slowly. “No. Not wrong.”

“Feels right to me,” he said.

“To me too.” She embraced him at last, melting into him.

For now, that was enough.

* * *

Later, after Chief Sylvester and his crew helped resupply *Cassiel* and put her in good working order, Chiara piloted the ship out of *Trollheim*’s flight bay and into Watcher’s system. Loco sat in the copilot’s seat, for once feeling satisfied with the world. Brock was puttering with his merc gear in the cargo bay, and Raj was on the tail gun where he liked the view.

Belinda had decided to stay with *Trollheim* and the rescued Breaker spacers for now, the only people she knew. She was bright and energetic. She’d find her place.

Chiara flipped a switch and moved a cursor on the main screen to highlight one of the many wormholes floating around the system. “That one?”

“That’s what Roentgen said.”

“You think Gurung will go along with it?”

Loco nodded. “If I know him, he’ll already have his fill of trying to run a community of pigheaded civilians. You know something about that, right?”

“Yeah, I do. No fun. I’m much happier out here on my own.”

“With us.”

“That’s what I meant. On our own.” Chiara reached over to squeeze his hand.

“Besides, he’ll be happy to reconnect with the Breakers.”

Soon, they passed through the designated wormhole. Its other end turned out to float mere kilometers from the lumpy, disc-shaped Furmian ship Gurung commanded. That ship was vainly trying to maneuver away from the wormhole, which followed effortlessly through the trackless glowing gas.

A quick comlink scan revealed a continuous, worried hail from Gurung.

Loco spoke. “Senior Gurung, this is Captain Paloco. You don’t need to try to run away.”

“General Paloco! It’s good to hear your voice, sir.”

"I'm not a general now, Vedayan, any more than you're a chief. Just the captain of a ship. I've resigned from the Breakers."

"Really?" Gurung asked. "Why?"

"A long story for another time."

"We'll always be Breakers, sir, no matter what the paperwork says."

"Fair enough. But I'm not your boss anymore. If anything, you outrank me now."

"If you say so, sir. What's going on?" The single engine on the Furmian ship shut down.

"Another long story. The short version is... I hear you could use a home, some recruits, and a green planet."

"You can show us the way out of Hell's Reach?"

"Eventually. But for now, there's a place that's safe and friendly, with people and resources you need—and they need you."

"What do you mean?"

"We've got people, and you need help. We've got husbands for your women and techs for your machines. Population replenishment. You've got crops, farmers, livestock, and hardworking people with low-tech skills perfect for helping settle a planet."

"Furmians don't like settling down in one place, sir."

"Nobody's asking them to stay permanently—but come with me and you can trade, recruit, resupply, teach, farm—it'll benefit everyone."

Gurung paused, and Loco could hear muffled conversation in the background. No doubt Gurung was consulting with his Furmian advisors. "All right, sir. As long as we're free to leave when we want, we're happy to come along. Anything to get out of this trackless wilderness."

"Good to hear. Follow us through the wormhole. It's perfectly safe."

Cassiel left the Furmian ship orbiting above Watcher's strange double world. Loco had already said his goodbyes, telling Straker and Engels he wouldn't be reassuming his position in the chain of command. "I'll always be there if you need me, Derek," he said, "but right now, I have to follow my heart, and that's with Chiara."

He'd decided it was better to head out into the Middle Reach and live Chiara's preferred life as a free trader for a while, at least until something better came along. If things got boring, they could always pick a crimorg and raid it. Maybe he'd form his own mercenary band—freebooters, like he'd suggested so long ago aboard the original starship *Liberator*. Privateers

with ethics *and* purpose. Kick ass on the bad guys, free captives and recruit them to his cause. With luck, he'd get rich and make his woman happy.

That appealed to him.

However, as Gurung had said, on some level he'd always be a Breaker. If Straker ever went back to free the Republic, Loco would play his part. Until then, he'd be Captain Loco. He'd have to think up a better name, though, to spread around. Loco the Looter, maybe. A feared but fair and honorable space pirate.

He smiled.

Something like that.

He glanced over at Chiara, and she showed him her strong white teeth. It was her first honest smile in a long time.

Yeah, this was gonna be fun.

The End

From the Authors: Thanks Reader! We hope you enjoyed HELL'S REACH. If you liked the story and want to read the next one soon, please put up some stars and a review to support the book. Don't worry if you're a fan of another series, more books are coming!

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